



LISA H. CATMULL

An Unsuitable  
Engagement

VICTORIAN GRAND TOUR SERIES

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VICTORIAN GRAND TOUR SERIES  
BOOK FIVE

LISA H. CATMULL

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Historical Note

Social Hierarchy in the Victorian Era, 1837-1901

*For my brother, Dougie, who died too young,  
and for anyone who lost a family member too early.*

# Acknowledgments

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# List of Featured Characters

*Lady Octavia Shelford*

*Lady Arabella Shelford, Lady Octavia's mother*

*Guy Claybury, the Duke of Woodford, British ambassador  
in Paris*

*The dowager duchess of Woodford, Guy's mother*

*Lady Clara Proutton*

*Lady Proutton*

*Lord Proutton*

*Mr. Rushworth, an undersecretary at the British embassy*

*Mr. Thorne, an undersecretary at the British embassy*

*Lord Yelverton, an undersecretary at the British embassy*



# Chapter 1

Early March 1858

"I'm not a child," Octavia protested as Guy tugged her by the arm toward the waiting train carriage. The sounds of hissing steam and squealing brakes filled the noisy terminal.

"Then stop acting like one," he growled. He stared at the conductor, motioning for him to open the doors.

"Tickets?" the man asked in Italian.

Guy gestured to his entourage. "I'm the British ambassador. Open the blasted doors now, and my staff will show you the tickets later."

The conductor scrambled to unlatch and open the polished green door and lower the creaky metal stairs. Lady Shelford lifted her skirts and accepted the conductor's help to gracefully climb into the carriage.

Octavia peered around the busy station. "I still don't understand the urgency."

Guy put his hands on her back to push her up the steps. "Go." His fingers slipped down to her waist, and she turned around, her eyes wide. He hadn't meant to do it, but she was so short. From where he stood on the platform, even a single step up put her at a different angle. Quite an attractive angle.

Octavia scowled down at him. "I can do this well enough on my own."

He tightened his hold on her waist, and she sucked in a breath. Guy closed the distance between them to block her way down the stairs, but Octavia didn't continue up them. She smiled at him.

*Obstinate, headstrong girl.* She always had been. If he moved even one bit, she'd be back down in an instant.

The conductor laughed. "Newlywed? Or does your wife always tease you this much."

She threw back her head and laughed.

Curse those Italian lessons. He never should have taught her.

"We're not married," he said gruffly.

“Ah. A mistress is harder to manage. That explains it.”

Octavia’s laugh turned to choking. She teetered on the thin metal step, her boots slipping on the rung of the stair, then clung to his shoulders to steady herself. Behind him on the station platform, the embassy staff whispered about the woman embracing him. The one he’d dropped everything for. The one coming to live in the wing of his personal apartments.

“She’s not my mistress, either.”

“Of course.” The conductor winked.

Octavia looked over his shoulder at his staff and the station. Guy put a hand on her pert chin and turned it toward him. Her brilliant green eyes widened at his proximity, and he returned his hand to her waist. He had her attention now.

All hopes for a quiet exit from Italy had fled. All the attention in the station seemed fixed on them, and a line of muttering passengers had queued up behind them, but he would not relinquish his hold on her waist, nor would he lessen their scandalous closeness. He knew all of Octavia’s tricks. She’d find a way to dart out beneath his arm if he did.

Guy spoke with authority, even though her eyes blazed with resentment. “Inside. Now. *Please*. We’re holding up the line.”

She huffed and swatted at the hands on her waist. He dropped them in surprise. Octavia tossed her head as she turned and flounced up the stairs. Guy followed quickly, climbing each step that she vacated, making sure she could not change her mind.

He entered the train car and scanned the seats to see which benches might be safest for such a long journey, but Octavia folded her arms. She refused to look at him.

This was a nightmare. From the beginning, he had begged his mother not to invite their old neighbors, the Shelfords, to visit the embassy. Octavia would be a distraction that he could not afford right now.

Guy nudged her in the small of the back, and Octavia protested. She marched through the crowded carriage and threw herself onto a bench.

“Not there,” Guy called. “Over here.” He blew out a breath as Octavia scowled at him.

“Why not? I like it here.” She settled herself on a seat in the middle of the train car and gripped the edges of the bench.

Guy approached her and wrapped his hand gently around her

upper arm. He hoisted her up without any ceremony and half-dragged her to the furthest corner. Hadn't she seen her mother there, seated among the piles of hatboxes and luggage?

"Because you are a target for any lunatic if you sit directly in the center of the other passengers. Let my staff form a barrier between us and the others." He released her arm and gently guided her toward a padded bench across from her mother. Octavia flopped onto the bench dramatically, as if he had flung her there. She might as well have been three years old again, not a seventeen-year-old woman. And what a woman she had grown up to be. He tore his eyes away from her reclining figure.

"Now I'm facing backward," Octavia said in a tone of voice that suggested the world might be ending.

He stared down at her. "Better that than dead."

"You're so melodramatic," Octavia replied in a starched voice. She straightened on the bench and pinched her lips together.

Guy took a deep breath and ignored the perfect shape of her mouth.

Lady Shelford switched seats with her daughter. "You can sit facing the landscape, dear. That bench has room for two people, and this bench only has room for one."

Octavia gaped at her mother. "Does he have to sit next to me, too? Can't he sit..." She looked around and gestured toward the back of the carriage. "Somewhere else?"

Guy grumbled, "We've been through this. Italy is in chaos. Separatists tried to kill the emperor of France."

"They were not going to attack *me*," Octavia said. "I was enjoying Rome." She smoothed the wrinkles at her waist, where he had helped her up the stairs, and moved her skirt to take up even more space.

Guy examined the carriage. Three burly footmen guarded the bench ahead of him and three more sat across from them. He'd taken six members of his staff off their posts at the embassy to chase Octavia down and escort her back to Paris, and he couldn't even find a place to sit for the return trip from Rome.

Lady Shelford had dropped her luggage on the seat beside herself so that only one seat remained across from her. He'd have to wedge himself next to Octavia. There was nowhere else in the train carriage where he could protect her, should the need arise. He resigned himself to a long, uncomfortable ride.

Guy cleared his throat, and Octavia dug her purse out of her pocket. She tossed it into the miniscule space remaining between herself and her enormous skirt.

He gritted his teeth.

“Would you like to see my sketches of the Forum? Or the Roman Baths? I spent half a day sketching the Coliseum.”

People had filled in the rest of the benches. Luggage in the overhead racks would obscure his view, if he continued to stand. Guy spared the other passengers a glance. No one suspicious yet. “I would like a seat.”

Octavia pursed her lips. Those full, red lips.

Guy grabbed ahold of the metal luggage rack above him as the train lurched into motion. “The attacks are spontaneous, not planned. The Separatists won’t hand you a tidy calendar and make sure it fits with your social events.” The train gathered speed as the steam engine pulled away from the station. “We’re British, and they want to drag us into their war. Anything can happen.” Guy pushed past Octavia’s ruffled skirt and outstretched legs to wedge himself into the corner.

She snatched her purse and turned toward him. “You took the window seat.”

“I need to observe the other passengers in the reflection of the glass,” Guy said.

Her lower lip jutted out in a pout, just as it always did when she didn’t get her way, but he would not give in this time.

And Octavia obviously knew it. She jammed the purse back into her pocket and sighed. “I wanted to watch them.”

Guy tried to silently communicate with the head footman. He caught Hugo’s eye, and Hugo shook his head. The other passengers raised no concerns.

A hand on his face startled him. Octavia smirked up at him but didn’t let go. Her delicate fingers gripped his chin firmly. “You haven’t enquired about my Grand Tour.”

Guy tried to talk with her hand entangled in his beard, but the words came out sounding like he had a locked jaw. “You’ve been gone almost a year. Your answer will take the entire train ride.”

The corners of her mouth lifted in a grin. “So, are you going to ask me?”

“Are you going to let go?” Guy asked through a clenched jaw. He reached for her hand and tried to knock it aside, but Octavia

twisted his wrist painfully and held his arm at an uncomfortable angle.

“Not until you beg to hear about my trip.”

Hugo snorted, and Guy glared at him. The snorts and laughter suddenly changed to coughing.

“Please, tell me all about your trip.”

Octavia let go of his arm. Guy shook it out. Where did she learn how to do that?

“Thank you for coming to collect us, Your Grace,” Lady Shelford said. She glanced at Octavia. “Let him sleep. I’m sure he’s exhausted. An ambassador has so much to deal with.”

Guy nodded politely and tried to hide the tension he felt. “Thank you, but I prefer to stay awake as long as I can. It’s been a difficult couple of months since the assassination attempt. The fact that the plot was hatched in England has created a lot of tension with France, and people blame us unfairly.” He darted an anxious glance around the train car again.

“Our country did allow the Separatists asylum,” Octavia said, and yawned. She was obviously trying to needle him, and he would not fall for it.

“Let’s get some rest and leave the politics for later,” Lady Shelford said pointedly.

Octavia had settled in the middle of the seat, giving him barely a sliver of space on his seat. Guy pushed back, nudging Octavia over so that the metal edges of the window would not dig into his side.

But that meant their hips and shoulders were extremely close to one another. He held his space firmly. He refused to ride all the way to Paris with the window ledge pressing into his shoulder, just so Octavia could take up more space than she needed.

She shifted on the bench and craned her neck up toward him. A crease formed between her eyes, and she opened her mouth.

“I will not debate the political asylum bill that brought down the prime minister.”

Octavia’s lips spread in a slow smile. “Do you favor the new government or the old one?”

Lady Shelford shot her daughter another warning glance. “Sleep.”

“I prefer the new prime minister,” Octavia whispered.

Guy mimicked her mother’s repressive glance. “The change in power has only added to my workload.”

Octavia grinned up at him. Her smile was as mischievous as always. "If you're so busy, you need not have come for us."

The needling had gotten to him. Guy stretched in the corner of the too-small train seat, and Octavia yelped in complaint as he nudged her further over. "You ignored my first two telegrams."

"I hadn't visited the Coliseum yet," she replied. "And I want to paint it. You really should see my sketch."

Guy let out his breath slowly.

"You needn't be like that," Octavia said. "We would have come eventually."

"When I tell you to come, you need to come," Guy said. He shouldn't have said it. He wasn't her guardian, but he still felt responsible for her safety. He'd known her since she was born, and Spencer wasn't around to take care of her anymore.

Octavia bristled. "If you're going to be insufferable the entire time we're in Paris, I don't know how we're going to manage. I'm not your mistress or your wife. I wouldn't tolerate that kind of nonsense..."

She considered him for the blink of an eye. Something shifted in her expression, then her smile brightened again, and she laughed. "Even if I were."

Guy leveled his gaze at her. It stung to be dismissed out of hand. "If you were, things would be much simpler."

Lady Shelford raised an eyebrow. "If she were which? Your mistress or your wife?"

Octavia shrugged. "The conductor thought we were. I had my hands on his...He had his hands on my..." She laughed brightly again.

Lady Shelford's eyebrows raised even higher, and she cleared her throat. "Your Grace?"

But he was the Duke of Woodford, and he never had to explain himself to anyone. "There was no impropriety. It was a misunderstanding."

Lady Shelford glanced between them, and her voice was cold as ice. "And where were the hands?"

Guy did not deign to answer.

But Octavia had no such qualms. "On my waist and his shoulders. When I stand on the carriage stairs, we're nearly the same height."

Guy checked in the window's reflection again for any sign of

danger, but the way Lady Shelford's eyes were shooting daggers at him seemed to be the biggest threat.

She sniffed. "Oh, yes. Not a whiff of indecency or familiarity. You simply embraced my daughter in public for all the world to see."

Octavia turned and studied him, as if noticing him for the first time. She took in the appearance of his coat and vest and seemed to be pondering something. "I wouldn't call it a *full* embrace, really, Mama." She tilted her head and continued to scrutinize him as if he were a creature at the London Zoo.

"Go home." Guy glared at her. "It's much safer. *Please*, return to England." But if she knew that he wanted that, she'd stay. He should not have tipped his hand.

"I haven't seen Paris yet," Octavia said. "What shall I sketch while I'm there?" Her eyes held a challenge.

They were at an impasse, as usual. It was like one of their chess games, and he'd given away his strategy too early. Somehow, she always goaded him into revealing too much too early. He could never keep a cool head around her.

Guy flashed a devastating smile to try to disarm her. "The embassy. That should take an afternoon."

"Oh, your mother wishes us to stay indefinitely," Octavia said. "I'm sure she'd be heartbroken if we left too quickly. And you told me it isn't safe for us to travel right now." She returned a brilliant smile back at him, clearly aware of his strategy, and it was hard for him to remember why he would ever want her to leave.

Things were spiraling out of his control. Best to give Octavia the illusion of success, then he could sabotage her plans later.

"I'm still waiting to hear every detail about your Grand Tour," he said. He shifted his attention to the window's reflection where he could keep an eye on the other passengers—and block her dazzling smile. "Entertain me, *mistress*."

But a pair of soft gloves turned his head toward her again. This time her fingers grazed his jaw as she cupped his cheek playfully, as if he were hers to command. "Full attention."

He groaned, but Octavia kept her hands on his cheeks. Her brilliant green eyes sparkled with humor. "I know all your tricks. You never change, and you never listen."

He covered her hands and pulled them away from his face. He hadn't changed, but *she* had. She wasn't six or eight or twelve

anymore, and she seemed to have no idea that her touch set him on edge and made concentration impossible.

But now he found himself holding her hands in his lap, with her emerald eyes boring into his. He hadn't realized he was caressing the thin fabric of her silk gloves until her eyes widened. Guy dropped her hands as if scalded.

"I'm listening," he said casually.

Octavia stared at him, her eyes fixed on him with some emotion he couldn't read. It was probably horror or disgust.

He would pretend it hadn't happened. He could outbluff Octavia's bluff. Lady Shelford's eyes had drifted closed, and she had missed his blunder. "I'm paying attention. Is that so shocking?"

"What? No. Not shocking." Octavia laced her fingers together in her lap and rubbed them together. "We began by crossing from Dover to Calais. First, I had to decide what to pack. I wasn't sure how much to bring..."

Guy didn't hear a word after that. He glanced across the carriage. Lady Shelford smiled knowingly. Evidently, she had seen it. She knew what had happened.

Octavia put her hand on his chin and turned it toward her again. "Honestly, Guy. Do you even care how much I agonized over packing for my Grand Tour?"

He smirked at her and removed her hand, careful to drop it immediately. "Not in the least, darling girl."

She grinned. "Pay close attention. The trunks only had room for enough dresses for the fall and winter weather, so I decided to acquire spring dresses in Paris. Although winter in Italy isn't terribly cold, so perhaps the old dresses might do. Still, they're outdated and a bit worn from walking so much, and you'll have to find me a modiste in Paris. This is extremely pertinent to you. Are you still attending to me?"

"It always is relevant to me. I'm listening, but I am not taking you to a modiste. I have my limits." He scowled at her.

She shifted in her seat as she continued talking, perfectly content now that she had his full attention.

Guy felt his anger slipping away and his eyes glazing over, and he nodded whenever she asked him a question. He tried to hide his irritation with himself.

Why could she charm him out of any mood and into any other? He'd have to be careful to mask his feelings, though, and stay away



from her once they reached Paris.

Octavia's hands waved through the air as she described climbing on board the ship and the movement of the sea. Her eyes lit up, and her infectious smile lifted the sting from his heart.

He'd been wrong. This wasn't going to be a nightmare. This *was* going to be a trial, but it wasn't her fault. It was his. Being around Octavia daily would test every bit of his fortitude. He could hardly resist her beauty, her wit, and her endearing enthusiasm for the most miniscule details.

After all, she had barely turned seventeen *last week*, and he was twenty-nine years old. He would turn thirty in three months.

Octavia's face glowed as she described the color of the sea and her first view of Calais. She rested her fingers lightly on his arm and leaned close to emphasize how outrageously the seagulls had behaved.

Guy remembered the way Octavia had also leaned into him when he put his hands on her waist, and the flash of something indescribable he'd seen when she'd said the word "wife," and the way her hands lingered on his shoulders as she lost her balance on the step. He moved his arm on top of the bench, resting it just behind Octavia.

Lady Shelford cleared her throat, and he withdrew his arm instantly.

Octavia's petite hand seized his jaw yet again. "Guy! Your mind is wandering again. I haven't told you about the adorable horses that drew the carriage to Dover. Can't you focus on me for five minutes?"

He groaned. Perhaps it was going to be a nightmare, after all.

## Chapter 2

Octavia woke to the soothing rhythm of the train wheels rolling over metal tracks. She opened her eyes just wide enough to see a shaft of morning sunlight streaming through the bottom edge of the drawn curtain. She yawned and stretched against the seat cushion. It seemed far more comfortable than last night when she'd tried to fall asleep.

She nestled her hand against the seat and sighed. It shifted beneath her.

Seats couldn't move.

Octavia opened her eyes slowly. Guy had tipped his head against the window to sleep, and her head had fallen onto his shoulder. She glanced down. That comfortable seat was his chest, and she had her arm stretched across it. Her slippers were snuggled next to his legs, which stretched halfway across the aisle. One of his arms was draped around her shoulders, as if it had slid down from the seat during the night.

She must have talked him to death, then fallen asleep on him. *How mortifying.* But comfortable. She grinned and took a deep breath. The curls in his dark hair hung on his forehead, and all the anxiety had fled from his face. His chest rose and fell in the easy rhythm of slumber. The weight of his arm around her was like a blanket. Another half-embrace.

Octavia bit her lip. How to move without waking him? She had no desire to be caught enjoying another entirely inappropriate position by Mama or Guy. She slowly lifted her head from his shoulder, but her chin brushed against his arm.

Guy's hand shot out and captured her own, as if by instinct. *Drat.* His eyes flew open, as his other arm wrapped around her. He held her locked in an embrace, but he looked wildly around, as if expecting an assassin to appear with their breakfast tray.

"It's me," Octavia whispered. Guy stared at her, blinking away the sleep and confusion, but he didn't loosen his grip on her. Did he think she had chosen to sleep on him? It was an accident, and she needed to explain. Perhaps she could whisper an explanation

without waking Mama. He might get the wrong idea.

But her mother's drowsy voice pierced the awkward silence. "Ocky?"

*Double drat.*

Mama yawned and stretched. "I thought you weren't his mistress."

Octavia laughed despite herself. "I'm not."

"Then why are you embracing him?" Mama smoothed her hair and pulled open the curtain to let in the morning sun.

"He's embracing me," Octavia said, fully aware that she was leaning further across Guy in her efforts to disentangle herself.

"Hardly," Mama said. "Sit up, dear, and leave Woodford alone. My apologies, Your Grace."

Guy finally extricated his arms from her shoulders as Octavia pushed herself up from his chest.

She grinned and hoped she could pass this off with some humor. "You make an excellent pillow."

"You snore," Guy said.

Octavia panicked. Had he awoken before she did? What did he remember? How long had she slept on him?

"A lady never snores," Octavia said. "On occasion, we breathe loudly."

Guy snorted. "You could wake the dead."

"You're bluffing," Octavia said. *She* was bluffing. It was an instinct, born of years of teasing and trying to outsmart him.

His eyes narrowed.

"If I snore so loudly, why did I wake first?" Octavia straightened in her seat, trying desperately to regain some sense of dignity.

"If you woke first, why did I find you still nestled on my chest?" Guy smirked at her.

"If you woke first, Woodford, why would you allow her to remain there?" Mama asked him. "And why would you be there in the first place, Octavia?"

They both turned to Mama, speechless, then glanced guiltily at each other. Had he been awake, too, or not? How long had she slept on him? She wouldn't have minded a few more minutes. She grinned at him.

Guy tugged at his collar. "Beautiful day outside. Spring in Paris is beautiful. You're just in time to see the blossoms coming on."

"Honestly," Mama said under her breath, but Octavia could hear

her. "We've been together less than twenty-four hours, and I already have this to contend with."

"What?" Octavia asked.

Mama glared at them. "You act like you're married. You fight like you're married. No wonder the conductor thought—well, never mind. We're nearly at the train station, so let's be clear. You must call Woodford 'His Grace' from now on. You cannot treat him the way you're wont to do."

Guy was retreating into his stuffy old self. "It's true, Octavia. I'm the ambassador, and I cannot afford any rumors."

"Oh, please," she said. "That was a lark. The conductor didn't really think—"

"But my staff was watching us as they loaded the luggage in Rome, and you're staying close to me in the personal wing of the apartments at my mother's request. Not mine." Guy's gaze was intense and serious now. "And the footmen just saw us in this compromising situation, and they will rush home to tell the other staff. So will you please refrain from using my Christian name while you're staying at the embassy?" The strain in his voice dimmed the sunlight streaming in through the window.

"Honestly?" Her tone was a subdued shade of defiance when she replied. Octavia shook out her legs and tried to get comfortable, but she avoided Guy's scrutiny. "I cannot undo the habit of a lifetime."

Guy muttered something under his breath.

Her eyes met his briefly. "I'm not returning to England, and I'm not a menace."

His brows shot up. "How can you hear me?"

She shrugged and let her gaze settle on the footmen in the row ahead of her. It worked, every time. He was so easy to predict. "If I'm such a menace, why do you let me sleep on—"

"Octavia!" Mama said sharply. "People will hear you. This is exactly the kind of teasing that you cannot do now that we are in Paris. You must think of Woodford as the head of the embassy, not as your brother's old friend. You cannot harass him the way you used to pester Spencer."

Any remaining joy drained from her at the mention of her deceased brother. His unexpected death from a common winter illness still haunted her.

Steam hissed as the train slowed to enter the station. Octavia folded her hands in her lap. She knew better. Mama expected her to

act like the daughter of an earl. She drew back her shoulders and tipped up her chin, but she couldn't stop the quiver.

Any mention of Spencer did that.

The train jerked to a halt, and Guy's staff rushed to unload their luggage. People jostled each other to exit the crowded train carriage, but Octavia carried herself like a queen. Silent, composed, regal. Hiding the pain.

Guy tried to catch her eye, but she turned her shoulder to him. He scrubbed a hand over his face and said quietly, "You're not harassing me."

Octavia was barely holding herself together.

Guy laid a hand on her shoulder. "You're not a menace."

She couldn't look at him, or she would burst into tears.

"Spencer wouldn't—" Guy said. "I don't think—" His growl of exasperation only made her feel worse. He let go and began to take luggage off the rack, muttering to himself about stubborn people who couldn't accept apologies.

Octavia wanted to hug herself and hide in the corner, but she kept her eyes on the other end of the carriage and waited for everyone else to leave.

Guy gave orders to his staff, and Mama's mountain of luggage vanished. Octavia maintained her composure while people bustled all around her.

Mama patted her hand. "Much better, Ocky."

"If you wish me to call His Grace by his formal name, please call me Octavia." She hated the childhood nickname.

"Certainly, but when we are alone, I can call you anything I like," Mama said.

"Then why can't I call him 'Guy' when we are alone?" Octavia asked immediately.

Mama turned to her and narrowed her eyes. "It would be best if you two did not spend any time alone."

"I only meant—"

"You're old enough now that spending time alone with him is different than it used to be," Mama said.

*Alone with Guy.* "But surely, two old friends..." The possibilities were intriguing, especially after waking up on his chest this morning. "What danger could there be?"

He returned from his conversation with staff members. All the peace she'd seen this morning was gone, and worry lines creased his

face. "If you'll follow me? It's safe to exit now. We have carriages waiting to take you to the embassy. I'm sorry for the delay. Some drivers refuse to accept British customers." His nostrils flared.

She had barely made it down the stairs when he gripped Octavia's elbow, securing her close to his side. She stumbled, trying not to cling to him, then righted herself. "Guy!"

"Your Grace," Mama corrected her.

"I can walk," Octavia said.

He stopped and drew her around to face him. "I was helping you."

"You made me trip."

"Stay close."

"Not that close, Guy." She spoke before she looked up. Her throat tightened.

His aquamarine eyes were full of the warmth and worry she knew so well. He held her arm wrapped around his, but her chin barely reached his shoulder. Guy peered down and said softly, "I will not let any harm come to you."

"And I promise not to run away," she said gently, and laid her hand on top of his. "Where would I go?"

Guy studied her and blew out his breath. "I'm sorry." He motioned toward the carriages across the square. "After you. Lady Shelford?"

Mama nodded. "Go ahead. Hugo will assist me."

Octavia strolled at a controlled pace, not his frantic rush. "Much better. Now, about finding me a modiste."

"You do understand that I am trying to avert a war between England and France?" Guy asked.

She grinned. "Yes, but you have to take a break every now and then. Where did you acquire this fine coat?" She tugged at his suit lapel, and the memory of last night's sleep returned.

"I don't need someone else managing my schedule," he muttered. "Mother can take you to the modiste."

They waited for a carriage to pass. The matching chestnut mares gleamed in the sunlight. The jangling of the harnesses and striking of hooves on stone filled the air.

"You're not sleeping enough, you're not smiling enough, and I insist you take breaks to see me regularly." Octavia peered up at him. "I'm not managing your schedule. I'm helping you and staying close, like you said."

"You're trying to manage my life," Guy growled. "Even worse."

She felt the barb but chose to overlook it.

"This was *your* idea. I didn't want to come. Now that I'm here..."

Octavia smiled brightly at him.

Guy groaned, but there was humor in his grimace this time. "So, you *do* intend to harass me."

He could be arrogant and overbearing and condescending, but he also felt like comfort and safety and peace. Like home. Wasn't that what family meant? Bickering and irritation and laughing together. Percy was equally annoying and entertaining, and he was the only brother she had left. Unless Guy counted as a brother.

She bit back a laugh.

"What?" Guy asked. "We're nearly there." The tension in his face had increased.

Octavia played with the fabric of his coat sleeve. "You're not half-bad to be around...when you're asleep."

Guy's mouth barely twitched.

"You would have laughed if Spencer said it. He would've kept you humble and helped you through this nonsense."

"Not here," Guy hissed, indicating the open square. "Not the place to talk about it."

Octavia laughed. "About your lack of humility? Or about the fact that you hardly smile anymore?"

He scanned the traffic, and he didn't even respond to her bait. Octavia drummed her fingers on his arm while she waited for the carriages to thin and make room for them to cross.

Spencer was gone. Guy needed *her* to make him laugh, if no one else would.

His fingers covered hers, as if to stop her nervous tapping. They had barely begun to cross the busy thoroughfare toward the waiting carriages when his thumb began tracing patterns on the top of her hand. Ever so lightly. He seemed unaware that he was doing it. His narrowed gaze was directed at passing carriages, not at her.

She glanced sideways at him, and he continued to scrutinize traffic. Yes, he had no idea what he was doing.

This was her chance to tease him. Perhaps years of being a bachelor had made flirting a habit for him, and he forgot that she was like family. But she dearly loved to see the always-in-control duke uncomfortable, and Spencer would *never* have passed up any chance to embarrass his old friend.

She couldn't help it. They approached the carriage, and she allowed Hugo to escort Mama past them. As Guy scanned the plaza for threats, Octavia slowly turned her hand to the side. His thumb traced circles on the side of her hand while he scowled at the carriages. She bit her lip to keep from laughing.

Octavia turned her hand all the way this time, and Guy's thumb moved on its own across her palm. She shivered, then ran her finger lightly across the top of his hand in return. Guy blinked at the water fountain in the center of the plaza and froze.

"Keep walking," Octavia whispered.

He stared at her, then glanced down at their intertwined hands. He jerked his hand away from hers.

*Caught.* Octavia waited to see whether he would laugh, but he looked everywhere around the plaza for threats that didn't exist. Again. They reached the carriage at that moment.

"How are you going to help me up the stairs this time? Pushing me from behind, like you did in Italy? Or could you give me a *hand*?" She winked at him and tried to hide her smile as she calmly extended her gloved fingers to him. He wasn't playing along like he should, but he helped her up the stairs and into the horse-drawn carriage.

She held his hand a little firmer than usual and a little longer than necessary as she climbed the stairs. Her lips twitched with the laugh she was hiding, and her eyes begged him to join her in the joke.

Octavia settled next to Mama and waited for Guy to sit across from her. He took off his silk topper and flexed his hands.

She grinned at him now, still anticipating a reaction, her eyes never leaving his face. He watched her warily, too, as if *she* were a bomb that might explode beneath the carriage as it jolted and began the ride toward the embassy.

What had happened to him the last few years? Why couldn't they tease each other anymore?

She didn't have Spencer's flair for telling jokes, or perhaps Guy was worried about what Mama would think.

She should have been worried about what Mama would say instead.

"One week."

"I beg your pardon?" Guy brushed off his pants. The buildings were passing by quickly, and the embassy must come into sight



soon.

“If you’re not engaged within a week, I’ll eat my words. Honestly, Octavia, what kind of game were you playing with his hands?”

She could not hold back anymore when she noticed the look of mortification on Guy’s face. “He started it,” she said, laughing between gasps.

“I’m certain he did, but didn’t you listen to anything I said? I thought you knew how to be more subtle with your flirting. Woodford, I thought you had more sense than to engage in that sort of thing in the middle of an open town square. What must the footmen think?”

Octavia laughed even harder. “I’m sorry, Guy. I couldn’t resist.”

He shook his head. “Nightmare.”

“Learn to be discreet, at the very least,” Mama said. “It’s no secret that the duchess and I think you two would suit each other well, but can you take a few months to explore the idea instead of a few hours?”

Mama’s blunt honesty stopped Octavia’s laughter. She caught Guy’s eye and saw her embarrassment mirrored there. She started giggling all over again. “Hugo saw everything. You must admit your behavior.”

He mumbled under his breath, “What was I thinking?”

“You weren’t,” Octavia gasped and caught her breath. Guy wasn’t laughing with her. He looked almost—guilty.

She leaned across the carriage to try to ease the awkwardness between them. “Never mind what Mama says about matchmaking. You simply forgot who you were with. You did the same thing last time you held my hand, too, but I could not resist teasing you this time.”

Guy exchanged a glance with Mama. He tapped his silk topper against his leg over and over again. Octavia put her hand on top of the hat to still it.

“Thank you for the laugh,” Octavia said. “I needed some relief from the worry about assassinations and politics and bombs. You do, too, but you’re too stubborn to laugh.”

Lady Shelford cleared her throat.

Octavia sighed and relaxed against the padded seats. “Fine, Mama. If we have to be boring. Please, Your Grace, tell me who else is staying at the embassy. Anyone I know?”

Guy looked out the window, toying with the rim of his hat, then back at her. "My worthless assistants. Don't repeat that, Octavia."

She groaned dramatically. "Of course not. You always complain, and I never tell your steward or your secretary or whomever it is that has failed to live up to your ridiculously high standards."

"I'm not demanding."

Octavia tilted her head. "Really? I cannot even get you to laugh at yourself."

Guy crossed his arms and refused to take her bait. Again. "I'm discerning. I expect excellence. Competence, at the very least."

"And who has failed to demonstrate basic competence *this* time?" Octavia smiled at him. "It cannot be me. An experienced bachelor like yourself may be discerning, but my flirting is considered excellent by many in London."

"Octavia," Mama said. "Stop teasing him."

But Guy would not be distracted from his course of conversation. "Yelverton. Thorne. Rushworth. The three of them think diplomacy is little more than flirting."

Octavia's smile widened to a grin. "Isn't it?"

Guy shook his head, and something twisted in the pit of her stomach. Octavia hated to see that expression on his face already. They had only been together one day, and he was already disappointed by her.

"Well, if I cannot get *you* to laugh, I'll be glad to see them," Octavia said. "I have half a mind to accept Yelverton's marriage proposal after all."

She settled back to enjoy the look of consternation on Guy's face for the rest of the ride to the embassy, but he quickly hid his surprise. After one glance at her, he stared at the wall of the carriage above her head with his jaw clenched.

Why had she said it? Why did she always push him until she got that reaction?

Octavia could not shake the familiar knot that twisted her insides and made her feel like a child again. This was the reason she'd spent a year avoiding Paris and Guy and the embassy. This was the reason she'd tried to stay in Italy.

This was the feeling she got every time Guy glanced at her, then looked over her head as if she wasn't even there, and it ached just as much every time.

## Chapter 3

Guy stepped out of the Yellow Room and scrubbed a hand over his face. The French government refused to believe England had not ordered the assassination attempt on Napoleon III or at least been aware of the planning. England had to prepare for an invasion by France. The French ambassador refused to rule out retaliation.

And the ambassador wanted him to resign because he was a disgrace.

Octavia waltzed merrily down the hall toward him and the French ambassador. She smiled charmingly at both of them. "How did your meeting go?"

The French ambassador bowed over her hand and took in Octavia's appearance appreciatively. Her dress fit especially well, and her blonde curls framed her face today. "I am sorry to tell you that your friend is a liar, but I am delighted to meet you, mademoiselle."

Octavia dimpled a smile at the ambassador and then studied Guy. She tugged at his lapels and straightened his bow tie, then brushed off the front of his coat. "You should have worn the blue waistcoat."

The ambassador turned to him and spoke in French. "Oh, my mistake. This is your wife? I thought you were unmarried."

Guy shook his head. The ambassador grinned. "Ah. She is..."

Octavia answered in French. "I'm not his mistress. Why does everyone think that?"

The French ambassador laughed. "*Enchanté, mademoiselle.*" He glanced between Guy and Octavia, who had slipped her arm through his. The ambassador tipped his hat and left down the corridor.

"Octavia," Guy hissed. "You cannot treat me so casually in front of foreign ministers. I'm trying to prevent—"

She yawned. "A war. You'll never succeed in this suit." She ran her hands over his chest and patted his vest.

Guy removed her hands. His heart raced beneath her touch. "You're not my wife. It's not at all appropriate—"

Octavia waved him off. "Someone has to tell you, and if your mother won't, I will."

Guy led her toward the gardens for afternoon tea. They needed to be somewhere with other people, somewhere other than an isolated corridor where they were alone, and her hands were exploring his chest. Again.

"You fail to understand how serious things are."

"But he was charming," she said. "And your meeting went poorly. I was trying to help you."

"How did you help me?" Guy asked.

"He was frowning before I came, and he smiled when he left. I'm sure his opinion of you rose." She practically danced along the corridor. She'd always been so light on her feet.

"Because he thinks you're my mistress! Do you have no concern for your reputation?"

Octavia shrugged. "We're in France." She straightened his bow tie again and combed her fingers through his hair. She gently traced a line across the crease in his forehead, then dropped her hand. "You really should let me speak with your valet."

"I'm not your doll," Guy muttered. "I can dress myself." He increased his pace. He'd never last a week. He'd go crazy first and send her back to England or Italy or across the sea. He blew out a breath. He would never allow anyone else to treat him like this.

"Of course you can," Octavia said. She stopped him at the glass doors that led to the back patio. Her eyes dropped down to the fit of his vest and across his shoulders, then back up to his face. She skated her fingers around his collar and along the edge of his bowtie. "But I would do a better job of it. You should wear more blue to match your eyes. Bolder patterns and more stripes." She tugged at the bottom of his vest.

Guy sucked in his stomach to avoid her touch. His voice came out strangled. "Anyone can see you through the glass door."

"No one's watching us," Octavia said. She linked her arm with his. "I have half a mind to go through your closet myself."

"No!" Guy said, and he opened the patio doors before she could examine his coat or any other articles of clothing or put her mind to anything else relating to him.

Three gentlemen quickly stood, their metal chairs scraping on the cobblestones.

"Thorne! Yelverton! Rushworth!" Octavia left his side with her

hands held out to greet the men. "What a delight. I was just reassuring the French ambassador that I am not Guy's mistress, but I rather think he likes me more because he believes I am."

Guy searched the long table for Lady Shelford and found her there, seated next to his mother. She glared at him as if he had shattered her favorite vase.

But he was the Duke of Woodford, and he did not have to explain himself to anyone.

Still. His face felt flushed from Octavia's exploration of his waistcoat, and he would have liked to have appeared more composed.

He could not find any words to explain Octavia, so he did not try. He kept a neutral face and seated himself near the center of the iron tables where he suffered through the tea service every afternoon.

Octavia was busy greeting her old *friends*, if that was the right word. Yelverton was clearly still smitten. Had he truly proposed to her? No wonder the incompetent puppy had applied to work with him at the embassy after the Season ended. He must have known that Octavia intended to stay in Paris.

Clearly, she was wondering the same thing. "But I've missed all of you. What brings you to the embassy?"

Yelverton gazed at her adoringly, and just like that, she had turned her attention completely away from Guy and onto his three new assistants.

*Problem solved.* She could rearrange Yelverton's wardrobe. Finally, Yelverton would be useful for something, even if he hadn't done any work around the embassy since he'd arrived in January. He would distract Octavia.

As long as Yelverton understood that he would never become deputy ambassador if he so much as looked the wrong way at Octavia. Guy shook his head. *Propose to her?* What had the idiot been thinking? She was far too good for him.

Yelverton cowered when he glanced his way, and Guy realized he must be scowling. The man had no backbone. He'd never stand up to Octavia, and their marriage would be a disaster.

Guy listened to the conversation around him and accepted a cup of the weak tea his mother preferred. *Nasty stuff.* He really should put his foot down one of these days. It reflected poorly on the embassy, on his staff, on himself, and on the Empire. How could

they negotiate a treaty, if they couldn't serve a decent tea?

He took a sip and nearly choked. *Soon*. He had to risk hurting his mother's feelings and insist on a different cook or a different blend of tea. He looked down the table at Octavia, who met his eye and wrinkled her nose, then pointed at her cup.

He shook his head sternly. Even if he agreed, they had to maintain appearances.

Her face fell, and she turned her attention to the men around her. Guy followed her gaze to his useless assistant.

*Lord Yelverton*. He was a few years younger than Guy. Viscount. Not very active in the House of Lords. Hard to take him seriously.

Guy flicked his attention to the next man. *Thorne*. He'd heard a great deal about him before he'd arrived. Decent head for business and ran his estate well. Too bad *he* wasn't the one with a title.

*Rushworth*. Right. Isabella's old flame, poor man. He'd love to talk to him about his investments in the Caribbean.

Guy's eyes traveled back to Octavia on their own. She seemed to be telling a story and all three men were engrossed, especially Yelverton. Of course they were. Her golden ringlets framed her face, and her eyes were always irresistible when she told an anecdote.

His mother cleared her throat, and he realized he was neglecting the conversation around him. *Blast*. He'd never get these men to do any work now.

"And how long are you staying?" he heard Yelverton asking Octavia hopefully.

Before she could answer, a dog lumbered onto the lawn behind the embassy. It slowly ambled across the manicured grass, heading directly toward the patio, then found a bird and yelped loudly. It tried to dart the other direction, but flopped on the lawn instead.

Octavia rushed away from the table and onto the green. She whistled to the dog, who slowly lumbered over to her. The Great Dane came nearly to her waist. Its black and white harlequin coat contrasted with her navy fitted dress. They made a stunning pair, and Guy drank in the image.

Which was his first mistake. It distracted him.

The second was Lady Clara. In the instant his attention was focused elsewhere, she settled in the chair beside him. "My mother suggested I join you." She seemed aware of the impropriety and embarrassed, but he could see her mother gesturing to her.

By the time he had looked back at Octavia, the dog had its paws

on her shoulders. They were nearly the same height when the dog stood on its back legs. She was hugging the great beast, which should not be standing on anyone's shoulders.

"Pharaoh!" Guy shouted. "Down!"

But Octavia giggled and hugged the dog close, her face buried in the dog's fur. "Oh, let her be. She's a dear."

"But your outfit," Lady Clara said. She shrank back, as if the animal could get her dress dirty from there.

Octavia's head whipped around, and she seemed to take in the new seating arrangement. "Clara? You're staying here, too?"

"Obviously," Lady Clara replied.

The two women stared at each other. Octavia's eyes flitted between Guy and Lady Clara, seated next to him. Lady Clara inched her chair closer to him.

"Down, Pharaoh!" Guy yelled, but his perfectly trained dog no longer heeded him.

"And it's not a girl. The beast is a boy," Lady Clara said dismissively.

Octavia rubbed noses with the Great Dane. "Not this love. I'd know her anywhere. Who's a girl? Who's a girl?"

Lady Clara sniffed. "Tell her, Your Grace. I distinctly heard you call it 'Pharaoh.'"

Guy repressed a smile. "She's a girl." He pushed back his chair and left the table to join Octavia.

Lady Clara shot him a cool glance as he walked away from her. He'd have to ask Mother to seat her beside him at dinner tonight to apologize.

Octavia yelled ungraciously from across the lawn. "Women were rulers in Egypt, too. Weren't they? Who runs this embassy? You or that stuffy old duke?" She rubbed the dog behind its ears.

Guy approached Pharaoh and whistled. Now he had another distraction from his duties as ambassador. The Great Dane trotted to his side. "Pharaoh was perfectly well behaved before you arrived. Now she's broken out of the stables, and she's jumping on people."

Octavia had muddy paw prints on the shoulders of her new dress, but she bent down to scratch the dog behind the ears. "Good girl. She only hugs me. She won't jump on anyone else."

Guy shook his head. "I had finally trained her to act sensibly."

Octavia straightened. Her eyes flashed with indignation. "And you worry things will change now that I'm here, because I never act

sensibly?"

Guy collared Pharaoh and began to walk back toward the stables. "She needs to know her place and keep the rules, especially right now."

Octavia kept pace with him. Her voice was laced with anger. "Like Clara? I'm sure she never gives you pause or breaks the rules."

"We're talking about Pharaoh." Guy turned the corner to the stables. He had forgotten Octavia and Lady Clara knew each other so well. Add that to his list of worries.

"Oh. Are we?" Octavia smiled too sweetly at him. "Because I thought for one moment you were talking about me."

Guy inhaled deeply. "You could learn a few things, too."

Octavia gathered her skirts to keep pace with him. "Pharaoh is just fine the way she is."

"She's a—"

"Don't you dare call her a menace." Octavia's eyes narrowed in anger.

Pharaoh strained at his hold on her collar.

"She's young," Guy said.

Octavia glared at him. "She needs love and affection, not discipline."

Guy turned to her but did not slow his pace. "She needs to be trained. She doesn't need hugs that ruin a woman's expensive, perfectly fitted new dress."

Octavia flashed a look of surprise. "You noticed my new dress?"

"How could I not?" Guy mumbled, as Pharaoh scrambled away from him. He chased her down the side lawn and returned to Octavia.

She beamed at him. "You think it fits me well? Your mother recommended a modiste, and I went first thing this morning with Mama. She took measurements to sew some gowns, but she did have this one dress for me to take."

Guy struggled to hold onto Pharaoh. "Now is not the time for a lengthy discussion of fashion."

Octavia whistled a deafening shrill sound that left his ears ringing, and Pharaoh immediately stilled. The dog sat on the grass, panting, and gazing up at Octavia.

"It's the perfect time. Do you really like it? I couldn't decide between navy or burgundy for a traveling dress. I wanted something dark to hide dirt, and this was available immediately



without any wait." She brushed the mud off her shoulders.

Guy laughed. Octavia's hands were caked in straw and grass and dirt now. She grinned at him, and he forgot about the peace treaties and tepid tea and Yelverton for one moment.

"You should have gotten brown," Guy said. "To match my waistcoat."

"And the mud." Octavia held out her hands.

Their eyes met for a moment, and he glanced down at her waist. "Yes. It fits you perfectly. You found an excellent modiste. Navy is an excellent color on you."

Octavia's smirk softened to a smile. Pharaoh whimpered, and Octavia snapped her fingers. Pharaoh barely kept up with them as they continued down the side yard.

Octavia affected an adorable pout, just as she had when she was younger. Now his eyes were irresistibly drawn to her lips. He looked over his shoulder at the Great Dane to distract himself. Pharaoh ran to Octavia's side and nuzzled her hand instead.

"She's missed me," Octavia said. "Even if you haven't."

That was obviously true. Pharaoh had dug a hole beneath one part of her enclosure to escape. She had nearly gone wild in her attempts to reach Octavia.

Octavia was driving him out of his mind, too, with her oblivious and innocent charm, but he hoped he was hiding it better than his Great Dane.

Guy examined the fence. "Of course I've missed you, but Pharaoh is far too smart for her own good."

Octavia put a hand on her perfectly curved hip. "Are you afraid of intelligent females?"

"Terrified," Guy admitted. "Especially when they're breathtakingly beautiful." He winked at her, then carefully tried to wrangle the Great Dane into the kennel. How anyone could mistake the swollen belly of the pregnant dog for a fat, male animal was beyond him.

Pharaoh whined and pawed at the fencing. She was clearly trying to get back to Octavia, not him. He rested his arms on the fence. "She adores you far more than me, and she has since she was a pup in your father's kennel. I give you leave to treat her as your own while you're here. Train her as you see fit."

Octavia rewarded him with one of her genuine smiles, and he knew he'd made her happy. "Are you finally admitting that I'm

smarter than you?”

“Never,” Guy said. “Although Pharaoh has outwitted me.”

“Right. We’re only talking about the dog again. It’s been a difficult day, and I wanted a hug from *someone*, and Pharaoh is the only one who offered...”

Guy tried to repress a smile, but the corners of his mouth lifted against his will.

The smell of stables and horses surrounded them. Grooms came and went. Chickens squawked and scratched in the dust. The wind played with a tendril by her face as clouds drifted in the blue sky overhead.

The grin faded from Octavia’s face. “As soon as I saw Pharaoh across the lawn, it all came back. Percy doesn’t breed hunting dogs. He keeps dogs, of course, but it’s not the same. I miss Papa’s kennel, especially in the spring. When are her pups due? It must be any day, the way she’s acting.”

Guy still felt a hole that could never be filled. “You’re right. Any day. I’m sorry it’s been hard for you. I miss your father and brother some days more than others. It was Spencer who really cared about the Great Danes.”

She nodded. Her chin quivered. Here, hidden behind the embassy, in the dirt and mud and bustle and noise, Octavia had dropped her façade. “Hugging Pharaoh is like holding a piece of the past. She reminds me of Spencer and Papa and the time before they —”

Guy watched her struggle, and he couldn’t help himself. “Would you like another offer?” He opened his arms. “Could you use a hug from someone without dog breath? I’m not Spencer, but—”

Octavia nodded.

He drew her into an embrace. She wrapped her mud- and straw-covered hands around his pristine coat, but he didn’t care. Even if he had another meeting in twenty minutes.

“That’s why I chose a female,” Guy said into her shoulder. “When your father and Spencer died, I wanted to continue to breed their line of hunting dogs. This will be Pharaoh’s first litter.”

Octavia swallowed and looked up at him. Tears shone in her eyes. She put a muddy hand on his chest. Right in the middle of his brown waistcoat. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For making sure their legacy lives on.”

Guy smiled down at her. “That’s why I wanted you to be

careful.”

Octavia shook her head. “Always so practical. Pharaoh is fine.” She winced. “Your breath is nearly as terrible as hers, though.” She laughed and wiped her eyes, leaving a streak of dirt on her cheek.

Guy gently wiped the dirt away with his thumb. “I must be superior to my dog in some ways.”

Octavia’s breath hitched as she gazed up at him, then she rested her head against him. He wrapped her in his arms and let her mourn.

There he was, in full view of his servants and anyone who looked out of the embassy, embracing a woman to whom he was not engaged. Guy carefully pulled away and threaded her arm through his.

He’d have to change quickly before the next meeting. He could find something blue to wear instead.

Perhaps, if they went directly to the embassy, Lady Clara and her parents wouldn’t notice. Octavia didn’t seem to care where he led her. She was probably lost in memories of her family and their estate.

As soon as they rounded the corner, however, there was Lady Clara. Suspicious. Accusing. And her parents, watching and waiting like hawks.

“Did you manage to get the dear dog back into its kennel?” Lady Proutton eyed the dirt on his chest and shoulders and the matching dirt on Octavia’s dress and hands. She was far too keen a matchmaker not to notice.

“Yes,” Guy said tersely. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting. Octavia, are you well enough?”

“What?” She seemed to come out of a daze. “Oh, yes, of course, Guy.” She smiled gently. “Go ahead.”

Lord and Lady Proutton scowled at her use of his Christian name as she wandered off. Guy bowed to them. “Lady Clara. I look forward to seeing you at dinner. I hope I’ll have the honor of sitting near you.” He flashed a smile and continued into the building.

*Bluff.* Always bluff.

They knew he’d been holding Octavia in his arms, but they also wanted him to marry their daughter. They’d never accuse him of impropriety that would force him to marry someone else.

So, he was safe from them for now.

But he was not safe from himself.

# Chapter 4

Octavia inhaled deeply. *Nothing*. She tried again. *Still nothing*. What kind of perfume shop was this? She had heard so much about Piver's.

"Spritz the perfume onto a sheet of paper," Mama whispered. Guy's mother was waving a thick square beneath her nose. The duchess always wore a delicate scent that was barely noticeable.

Clara picked up a bottle from the counter, depressed the nozzle, and caught the mist on a piece of dense paper. She smirked at Octavia and wafted the perfume beneath her nose. "Floral notes with a hint of citrus." She handed the paper to her mother, Lady Prouton. "I prefer something more daring, perhaps with sandalwood."

*Floral notes*? Were the flowers writing letters to each other? She was utterly ridiculous. Octavia glanced around the store. While Clara loudly informed the others about the composition of each perfume, an elderly store attendant watched with disdain. His arms were crossed, and he looked as though he had eaten something sour.

The other attendants had refused to even speak with them. Instead, they had put a few bottles on the counter and retreated.

Octavia approached the elderly attendant. "Excuse me?"

He regarded her skeptically and merely raised an eyebrow.

"Could you help me select a perfume?" Octavia had dreamed of this moment, and she wouldn't let Clara or anyone else ruin it.

"The perfume is not for sale today," he said loudly.

The women turned toward him.

"You may only sample the fragrances." He inspected his fingernails.

Octavia lowered her voice. "I understand. We are British. I'm so sorry about the explosion in January. Was anyone you know injured by the bomb's blast?"

The man flicked an imaginary speck of dust from his stooped and ancient shoulder. "Perhaps."

"Naturally, you are upset with anyone from our country. We

should leave immediately.” Octavia took one last look around the store. Rows of sparkling cut-glass bottles lined the shelves behind the counter. “I’ve dreamed of this ever since I left home. This was the only store I wanted to visit. Thank you for allowing us a moment of your time.”

The aged attendant sniffed. “We still have good manners, even when our country has been attacked.”

Octavia dimpled a smile. “I’m so tired of rosewater. I wanted a chance—”

The man shook his head in disgust. “Mademoiselle. There is no elegance or sophistication in taking a single flower, even the rose, and making it ubiquitous.” He made another sound of disgust. “You are using rosewater? A beauty like yourself?”

Octavia shrugged. “My mother and I share the same scent.”

The man took her by the arm and peered intensely. “No. That will never do. A perfume is like the window to your soul. It should be your own. Your mother’s?”

Octavia didn’t think he could look more disdainful, but his disbelief bordered on outrage.

“I had hoped you could help me select my own scent, but nothing is for sale today,” she said.

“You do not require my expertise. Your friend knows everything already,” he said, waving toward Clara.

Clara spoke loudly as she tried each perfume. “Is this the *Heliotrope Blanc*? Yes, I have heard so much about it.” Mama seemed to be feigning interest while Lady Proutton watched her daughter with pride.

Octavia shook her head dismissively and spoke quietly. “We used to be friends.”

The man’s eyes lit up. “Ah.” He glanced between them. “You are rivals now?”

Octavia regarded her old friend from the nursing school. *Were they?* Clara had amber eyes and a composed dark bun with every hair in place. The two of them could not be more different, and Clara’s parents had clearly traveled to Paris with the express intent of trapping the duke for their daughter.

Octavia wasn’t trying to convince Guy to marry her, so they couldn’t be rivals. The thought of Clara marrying Guy left an odd, sour taste in her mouth. She had never imagined him marrying anyone. He was a perpetual bachelor.

But if the Prouttos believed they could trick him and make him miserable, then it was her duty to protect him from Clara. “Yes,” she told the attendant. It wasn’t strictly true, but it was the simplest explanation. She had to prevent Guy from marrying Clara, so that made them rivals.

A smile broke out on the man’s face. “Then we *shall* find the perfect scent for you, mademoiselle.” He guided her to the back of the store.

Octavia looked longingly at the ornate bottles. They caught the afternoon sunlight and sparkled, sending rainbows onto the floor. Elaborate stoppers topped the fanciest bottles displayed on the long counter.

“No,” the attendant said, with a look of disgust on his face. “Those are for tourists.” He led her through a curtain into the back room.

She wondered again what kind of shop this was. Plain blue bottles lined the storage shelves. Their brown paper labels had no pictures. Did this man know anything about scents?

He grinned and held his arms wide. “This is for our discerning clients—the real perfume.”

A tingle of excitement shot through her. What hid inside each unassuming bottle? “Please, choose for me,” she said. “You are the expert.”

The attendant scanned the shelves. “A-ha!” He spritzed a small amount onto a card.

Octavia caught a whiff of paradise. “It’s gentle, but strong.” She laughed. “How can that be? It’s like springtime and a sunset all at once.”

The man nodded appreciatively. “Violets.” He leaned in, as if to tell her a secret. “The scent will be popular soon, but I will let you have it before anyone else, before your friend.”

Octavia tried to hide a smile. “A single flower?”

The man laughed. “This is more complex than rosewater, I assure you. Violets are the dominant fragrance, but there are subtle undertones.” He winked at her, deepening the wrinkles around his eyes. “And no sandalwood.”

The store attendant moved slowly. He meticulously wrapped a few bars of soap and a bottle of lotion then scribbled something illegible on a simple, handwritten label. He included an unassuming bottle of the perfume. As he folded a generous sheet of brown paper

around the bundle, he asked, "Who is the man?"

Octavia checked the curtain to make certain no one could hear them. "Another old friend," she said.

He chuckled. "Just so. It always is." He painstakingly wrapped the package together with string. "Would I know the name?"

She laughed. "You are a romantic at heart, monsieur."

The attendant must have been nearly ninety years old. He pressed the bundle into her arms. "Come, tell Papa Piver about your love."

*Piver?* This was a member of the famous family himself? He was nearly her same height, his old age bending his frame. For him, she would keep up the pretense. Octavia whispered in his ear. "The British ambassador, the Duke of Woodford."

Piver waved his arms joyfully in the air. "Yes, yes! I've heard about him from Estelle. I heard about *you* yesterday. You just arrived, did you not?"

She nodded, confused. "Yes, two days ago."

Piver chuckled. "Ahh. I did not expect to meet you so soon. I shall tell Estelle that we met, Mademoiselle Violet."

"Estelle?" Octavia asked. The thought of Guy courting a French woman had not occurred to her. The idea of Clara pursuing him was bad enough.

But Piver merely winked. "She is your rival." He pushed her through the back curtain and into the store.

Octavia reached into her pocket to retrieve her reticule.

Piver stopped her. "Perfume is not for sale today." Even though he still spoke quietly, his voice suddenly seemed much louder than it had been in the storage room. "No charge for the Duke of Woodford's mistress."

The eyes of everyone in the store turned toward them. She could feel Clara watching her. Lady Prounton. Mama. *The duchess.*

Piver laid a hand on her arm. "It is my gift to the ambassador. He is trying to make peace between our people." He winked at her and tottered over to speak with one of the other attendants.

Octavia held her head high. She didn't dare correct him, nor would she confirm it. *Pretend like it didn't happen.* No one would dare say anything, and perhaps they didn't hear. She joined her mother and the duchess. Guy's mother smiled at her, but her expression was unreadable.

"What's that?" Lady Prounton asked.

Clara seemed angry and envious at the same time. "I understood that nothing was for sale today."

Mama eyed the bundle in her arms, as if she had stolen it.

Octavia hugged the soap and perfume to her chest. "It is a sample of a new scent."

Lady Proutton's lips pinched together. "At no charge, I heard."

Octavia kept her chin up.

The duchess cleared her throat. "My. I can hardly distinguish one scent from another anymore." She crossed the small shop and glided out the door. Mama followed her out of the store. Octavia wiggled her fingers in farewell, and Monsieur Piver bowed to her.

The fresh smell of a rain-washed street greeted her. She took a deep breath and raised her parasol. Clara and Lady Proutton joined her, scowling, as the footman lowered the steps and unlatched the carriage door. No one spoke, which suited Octavia. She didn't know how to explain Monsieur Piver's comment.

Well, she did.

But Clara and her mother would not appreciate the joke. The idea of Octavia as *anyone's* mistress was ridiculous. If they took the idea seriously, they thought poorly of her character and morals, and she had no patience with that. Clara knew her well enough that she should not believe those sorts of rumors.

They rode back in a luxurious carriage with room for six. Octavia had thought she might get a headache inside the small shop, but she hadn't considered the return journey to the embassy. The mix of smells was overpowering in their confined space. Clara and her mother had clearly tried the perfume on their skin instead of the paper, and Mama seemed to have carried a few papers home to use as sachets.

Octavia tried to hold her breath and inhale in quick, shallow gasps as infrequently as possible. She raised a handkerchief to discretely cover her mouth as whiffs of clashing scents threatened to overpower her.

"How long are you staying?" Mama asked.

Lady Proutton cleared her throat. "With the current uncertainty, we thought it best to stay safe in the embassy as long as necessary."

"Of course you did," Mama muttered. Octavia smothered a laugh. It was easy enough to turn it into a cough with the overpowering perfumes mingling in the air.

Her Grace deftly turned the conversation to another subject, and



Octavia stopped listening. She was still wondering whether the duchess had a sense of humor. It was one thing to joke in private, but quite another for a shopkeeper to openly acknowledge Octavia as the British ambassador's mistress, *which she wasn't*.

Surely, Guy had told his mother about the silly misunderstanding in Rome. And the incident on the train. And at the train station. And with the French ambassador. She bit her lip to keep from laughing. No wonder Mama looked nearly as stressed as Guy right now.

Finally, the footman opened the door, and a welcome breeze filled the interior. Octavia climbed down the steps of the carriage and lifted her skirts to avoid a puddle. She would take her package to her room and try the perfume before dinner.

Someone linked their arm with hers. A quiet voice said, "It's far more work than we let on."

Octavia glanced over. *The duchess*. Was she in trouble? Octavia entered the grand entryway together with Her Grace.

Guy's mother spoke as quietly as she always did. "So many things to consider. Selecting a signature scent. Buying the latest fashions. Putting on just enough makeup that it will appear that we are not wearing any at all." Her laugh was a light, breezy sound.

Octavia waited for the duchess to tell her what was truly on her mind.

"Your mother and I discuss it all the time." Her Grace was nearly as short as Octavia. They approached the marble staircase, but the duchess stopped to admire the chandelier hanging overhead.

Clara glanced over her shoulder at Octavia walking arm-in-arm with Guy's mother and paused with her foot on the bottom stair. Mama took Lady Prouton by one arm and Clara by the other. She marched both of them up the stairs while keeping up a torrent of inconsequential conversation.

"Yes. It's exhausting. I can't keep up with Mama. Being a Diamond is rough. I don't feel very polished most of the time." Octavia smiled at the duchess, who returned the gesture, and they began to ascend the perfectly polished marble steps. Their reflection shone up at her, and she only felt more inadequate. Her behavior at the perfume shop had been outrageous, and the duchess would surely send her packing immediately.

"I've never been able to keep up with Arabella," Her Grace said.

“Your mother has more energy than anyone I know.”

“Including me.” Octavia laughed. She was still anticipating the inevitable reprimand.

The others had vanished down the hallways toward their apartments. Her Grace stopped walking, and Octavia prepared to explain herself.

The duchess turned to her. “What scent did Piver give you?”

It wasn’t the question she expected. “Violets.”

Her Grace looked taken aback. “That is new. And he gave it to you *gratis*? Completely free?”

“He’s developing it,” Octavia said.

The duchess considered her. “That’s a good sign.”

Octavia shifted the package in her arms. “It’s a heavenly smell.” How much longer could she avoid the awkward part of this conversation?

“If he trusts you with an exclusive scent, he must believe you are truly attached to my son.” Her Grace peered at her.

Octavia’s feelings about Guy were no mystery. She shrugged. “Of course I am. And even though Piver’s angry at England, he likes Guy.”

The duchess seemed to latch onto her statement. “Yes, that’s the essential piece. Someone told him to trust the British ambassador. He refuses to sell perfume to any Englishwoman, but he gave his newest perfume to *you*. Right now, with tensions high, I wonder who could have influenced Piver in that manner.”

“He wouldn’t let me pay,” Octavia said.

“So I heard.”

Octavia took a deep breath.

“Your mother has already recounted her train journey here,” Her Grace said. “I do not need to hear more details.” Her eyes sparkled. They were as piercing as Guy’s could be. “But she now says five days instead of one week.”

Octavia darted a glance toward the empty corridor and her escape. “That’s absurd. It’s already been two.”

The duchess folded her hands together. “Has it? You didn’t correct Monsieur Piver. Why was that?”

Something fluttered in her stomach. “I’m *helping* Guy. The French ambassador got the wrong impression yesterday, and I didn’t correct him, either.”

Her Grace looked as though she didn’t know whether to laugh or

lecture her. "Do I want to know how he got that impression?"

Octavia shook her head. "Honestly, I don't know why people keep thinking that. I don't treat Guy any differently than I always have." But she remembered the thrill of running her fingers along his neck and around his collar. She never used to feel like that when she teased him, and she never used to unsettle him so easily.

The duchess studied her.

"Are you going to tell him about this?" Octavia asked. She dreaded the prospect of that conversation. Half of Paris must have heard the rumor by now, and he would be furious. Unless he thought it was funny, like she did.

"Yes," the duchess said. "Someone has to tell him the French government believes he has a mistress, so he's not caught off guard."

"The government?" Octavia echoed. A hollow feeling drained the humor from the situation immediately.

"They keep close tabs on all his relationships."

Octavia tried to smile. "I don't want my name to end up on a dossier. Shall I go pack for England?"

The duchess patted her hand. "You may stay, but you've helped him enough for now."

Octavia felt positively light-headed with relief until a thought occurred to her. "One question," she said. "What is the name of the French ambassador's wife? Is it Estelle?"

"No. It is Marguerite. Why?"

Then what woman knew Octavia had arrived in town? Who knew about the incident in the corridor yesterday? If the French ambassador hadn't told his wife, then who had told Piver? Who was Estelle, and did she know Guy well enough to laugh about Octavia behind her back? A rock dropped into the pit of her stomach. "No matter."

# Chapter 5

Octavia flounced onto the back patio. She avoided his eyes and seemed a little too confident. Guilt was written all over her face. Guy drummed his fingers, waiting for his mother to pour him another cup of flavorless tea.

*His mistress.* Why on earth did Piver think that? From what his mother had said, Octavia hadn't corrected the perfume maker. Now, all of Paris would believe that, too. He didn't mind the slur on his own character—worse things had been said about him—but he felt the slight to Octavia.

He was used to the kinds of lies and slander that followed a duke. She was not. She was young, innocent, naïve, and she had a reputation to uphold.

Guy wanted to pace up and down. He needed to be alone to think, but time alone was as elusive as the peace he sought to forge with France.

Yelverton offered Octavia a chair with a flourish. Rushworth and Thorne arranged themselves around her. *Puppies*, all of them. Guy strained to hear their conversation.

"How was your afternoon?"

Guy tried not to jump as Lady Clara swooped down on him, unaware, and slipped into a chair next to him. He had tried to be civil in the weeks since the Prouttons arrived, but her parents kept finding ways to force her on him. Even now her smile was strained, and she seemed more distressed than eager. An overpowering scent accompanied her, and Guy tried to cover his cough.

Lady Proutton watched him for any sign of weakness, so Guy took a gulp of Mother's tepid tea.

He was going to start scheduling meetings during afternoon tea, no matter what his mother said. She insisted this was as important as any other diplomatic duty, but he'd rather argue with any head of state than endure teatime with scheming mothers.

"Busy," Guy ground out. He knew better than this. He shouldn't take out his temper on Lady Clara, when it was Octavia who upset him. "How was your afternoon?"

“Delightful. What do you think of my new perfume?” Lady Clara tilted her neck ever so slightly toward him, coloring bright red as she did so.

Guy narrowed his eyes. Mother said they had not been allowed to purchase perfume today. It was a ruse. Lady Prounton watched them to see how he would react, so he would not react at all. She had instructed her daughter to behave this way. Lady Clara would never act like this on her own.

“Flowerful,” Guy said, moving his chair away from hers and trying not to breathe. He had no idea what it actually smelled like.

He choked down a sip of tea and ate a slice of cake in blessed silence. At the other end of the table, he heard Octavia laughing. Yelverton laughed every time she did, but his was not genuine.

Her giggles pushed him over the edge. He had to get away before he strangled her. *Anything* would be better than watching Octavia flirt with three men simultaneously, even Lady Clara’s perfume overload. After maintaining a civil distance for weeks, he hoped one invitation would not give Lady Clara or her parents any ideas, but if it did, he would deal with the repercussions.

He turned toward Lady Clara. “Would you care to accompany me on a walk about the grounds?”

She swallowed and set down her cup. “Yes, thank you.”

Lady Prounton’s eyes lit up. Guy stifled a groan. She was probably planning their wedding.

He offered Lady Clara his arm and immediately tried to send a message to Lady Prounton about his lack of intentions toward her daughter. “Mother, Lady Shelford, Lady Prounton, will you join us on the walk?”

Lady Prounton’s face fell. Good. Perhaps she had put the wedding plans on hold.

“Go ahead,” Mother said.

“No, thank you. We have plenty to discuss,” Lady Shelford agreed.

So, they were going to gossip about him as soon as he left. He couldn’t stop Lady Prounton from talking, but he wished his mother and Lady Shelford were a little more discrete. The staff was already whispering about the train ride from Italy.

The footmen had lost no time repeating those stories to every maid, cook, housekeeper, and groom. He’d already had to speak quite sternly with the staff about the importance of maintaining a

proper degree of decorum and discretion.

If he lost control of the servants, he would blame Octavia. And his mother. And Lady Shelford. And himself, for allowing these things to happen.

What a hypocrite, lecturing the staff about decorum and discretion, when half of Paris thought Octavia was his mistress.

He led Lady Clara past the end of the tables.

Thorne leapt up from his chair. "May I join you?"

A smile lit Lady Clara's face. "Reggie. I've hardly had a chance to talk to you." She glanced at the far end of the tables, where her mother scowled at Thorne.

"Here I am," Thorne said.

Lady Clara hesitated.

Guy caught Lady Proutton's disapproving eye. He hastened to include Thorne. "Yes, please join us." The two of them could talk, and he could walk alone.

"Are we all going?" Octavia pushed away from the table. Before he could respond, Yelverton and Rushworth had joined them. Any hopes of a quiet stroll vanished.

"I haven't seen the shrubbery or the gardens," Octavia said. "How extensive are the gardens?"

Guy sighed. "I hadn't intended to give a guided tour."

"I know a bit about the history of the place," Yelverton said. He held out his elbow.

But Octavia was watching Guy. "Perhaps another time. I want a moment with my old friend."

Yelverton set his jaw. "Of course." He looked like a petulant child. Why the Crown agreed to send him over was beyond reason.

Guy bowed stiffly. "If you'll excuse me, Lady Clara." Mr. Thorne rushed over to take her arm.

Rushworth dragged Yelverton forward. Lady Clara began conversing easily with Thorne, while her mother watched them leave through with narrowed eyes. The heat of Lady Proutton's glare followed them as the group set off.

Guy trained his eye on the long, curved row of clipped hedges in the distance. Octavia didn't hesitate one moment, but plunged right in. She slipped her arm through his, tucked herself into his side, and whispered, "Please don't be furious with me. The rumors are not my fault. Blame Estelle."

"Estelle?" Guy said. "What does she have to do with this? Don't

try to deflect this.”

Octavia gave him a scathing look.

He narrowed his eyes in return. This was not what he wished to discuss when he had Octavia wrapped so perfectly against his side, and he was just as angry at the wasted opportunity as he was at her lack of discretion.

“Don’t glare at me,” Octavia said. “I’m not twelve anymore, and your dragon looks don’t scare me now.”

Guy scoffed. “The French government has issued an ultimatum. The ambassador stormed out of my negotiations with him yesterday. He refuses to attend the next state dinner. I’m trying to decide whether to hire more guards, and how many troops to ask the queen to send over, and you’re off play-acting at a perfume shop.”

Octavia’s frame trembled beside him. Whether from anger or shame, he didn’t know, and he didn’t care right now.

Octavia spoke through gritted teeth. “*Estelle* told Piver that I was your mistress, so he insisted on giving me his latest scent to try. Blame her.”

Guy stared at her. He opened his mouth, then closed it. He rubbed his forehead, then shook his head. “Octavia.”

“He refused to let me pay.”

“You accepted it?” He groaned. “Do you have any idea how that looks to an outsider?”

Octavia’s smile was shaky. “It’s a lovely scent.”

Guy took a deep breath to steady himself. He could smell a hint of something subtle, something alluring, and chose to ignore it. But it was lovely.

Ahead, he could hear Lady Clara laughing with Thorne. In the weeks that she had visited, he’d never heard her laugh like that with him. “So, the entire French government truly believes... What if the rumors travel back to England?”

Octavia folded her arms across her chest. “Piver likes you better now. They all do. I’m sure *Estelle* adores you.”

Guy glared at her, sulking as if she were still six years old. “You’re not helping. This has to end.”

Octavia scuffed her slippers on the gravel and sent a few tiny pebbles flying. “I was happy in Rome. It wasn’t *my* idea to come to Paris.” She stopped walking and put a fist on her hip.

“Stop pouting. Your lower lip juts out.” Guy ran a finger across

her infuriating bottom lip without thinking, then froze with his hand on the corner of her mouth.

She stared at him, mesmerized. He wanted to trace the line back again, but he dropped his hand. He could feel the softness of her mouth still tingling on the pad of his fingertip.

Ahead of them, Yelverton cleared his throat. Octavia sucked her lips back between her teeth, took Guy's arm again, and they resumed their stroll.

"You're not helping the rumors," Octavia whispered. "Even if Estelle is spreading them."

Guy grinned down at her. "You have no idea who Estelle is, do you?"

Yelverton slowed down to join them. "Perhaps you'd care to hear that history now, Lady Octavia?" he asked her, but Yelverton looked at Guy, as if he were her guardian or parent, not her—

Her what? What was he to her? Why was everything noise and confusion when Octavia was around? He shook his head to clear his mind.

Yelverton backed off. "Another time, then?" He and Rushworth sped up again and joined Thorne and Lady Clara.

Guy snorted. "Fool. So easily shaken off."

Octavia giggled. "Who? Yelverton? Because I won't be shaken. Tell me who Estelle is."

A breeze carried a hint of Piver's new perfume to him, and Estelle was the last thing he wanted to discuss right now. Guy waved his hand dismissively. "A friend of the ambassador's. Part of the social elite. I barely know her."

Octavia tilted her head to one side, and her neck tempted him. "Swear that is the truth?"

"I swear." Guy drew Octavia closer to his side as he watched the men walking ahead of them. "Why did you refuse Yelverton?"

"He's too young for me, even if I am good at training puppies." Octavia grinned up at him.

Guy threw back his head and laughed. The others, walking ahead, turned around and looked at him. "You know he expects you to change your mind and fall in love with him."

"That's funny," Octavia said. "I fully expect him to change his mind and fall in love with someone else." The spring breeze teased Octavia's curls, and it took all of his willpower not to play with the tendrils on her neck. He remembered the feel of her hand and the



feel of her lip beneath his finger. He needed a distraction.

“How long has Lady Clara known Thorne? Her mother wasn’t pleased to see her with him.”

“Oh, it’s hopeless,” Octavia said. “He’s known her for years.”

“Really,” Guy said skeptically. “You believe he has no chance with her, because he knows her so well?”

Octavia waved her hand dismissively. “Of course. She regards him as too dear a friend.”

# Chapter 6

Something shifted inside Guy. “And friends cannot marry?”

Octavia shrugged. “Clara does not view Thorne the way a woman sees a man she wants to marry.”

“Nonsense,” Guy said. “How does a woman look at a man she wants to marry?”

Octavia had regained a bounce in her step. “Oh, a man always knows.”

Guy felt that infuriating mixture of fascination and irritation that only Octavia inspired. “I don’t.”

“Precisely. That is why you are still unmarried.” Octavia flashed a wide smile at him. “If you had seen a woman looking at you that way, you would be married by now—as would Thorne. He knows Clara won’t have him. She looks at him, but she never *sees* him.”

Guy ground his teeth. “I’ve had women chasing me since I was born.”

Octavia twirled one of her enticing curls. “They’re chasing your title, not you. They don’t see *you*. Once you see that look in a woman’s eye, you’ll know she’s smitten with you.” She batted her lashes at him.

Guy felt his temper rising again, and he wasn’t sure why. “I’ll wager you’re wrong. Thorne could capture Lady Clara’s heart. She can be persuaded to see him differently.”

Octavia leaned close to him, her eyes twinkling with challenge. “Because no woman could resist a man like him? And yet Clara has managed to evade his charms for all these years.”

Guy smirked. “He’s never tried. If I step aside—”

Octavia laid her hand on his chest. “That’s what this is really about.” She smiled up at him and tapped his vest for emphasis. “You take this wager personally. If a man cannot change another woman’s mind, it is a personal affront. If Clara cannot see Thorne as anything other than a friend, it is a failure for all men everywhere.”

The sun was suddenly too warm. Guy removed Octavia’s hand, which had begun to toy with his buttons.

“Stop scowling,” Octavia said. “Why shouldn’t Clara refuse him,

if she wishes to? Why must she fall all over herself simply because her old friend has developed feelings for her?"

This had definitely moved into dangerous territory. "It's clear that she already returns some of his affection."

"Does she? And *you* are the only thing standing between them?" Octavia's pert chin and dancing eyes were infuriating. "Do you have any idea how arrogant you sound? Do you really think no woman could turn you down, if she had to choose between you and someone else?"

Octavia had no idea how much her taunt stung. Her sister-in-law, Eleanor, had chosen her brother over him a couple of years ago.

"You're right, Octavia. *You* obviously have no problem turning down suitors," Guy snapped. "Why shouldn't the other women?"

Octavia's face softened. "I'm sorry, Guy. I went too far. I would never turn *you* down. They all showed poor judgment." She drew herself close to him and leaned her head on his shoulder. "But I'm glad they did, because now I have you entirely to myself." She straightened, and her voice softened. "You're right in one regard. I don't wish for you to court Clara. She would probably accept you, and she would be better off with Thorne."

Guy's mind went blank. Did Octavia truly mean she would accept an offer from him? She couldn't mean that. She just wanted him to stay a bachelor and dote on her while she flirted with other men.

Her tone turned brisk. "Shall we make it a real wager? The kind you and Spencer used to bet with each other?"

Guy considered her. He could hardly keep up with her changes from one mood to the next. "Name your forfeit."

Octavia pursed her lips. Her soft, full, red lips. "Not until I win. This will be a lark. Let's make a match for them."

Guy helped her around a puddle. "You agree with me? Has this ever happened before?"

Octavia laughed. "Never, but consider how furious this will make her parents."

"Or how happy it could make Thorne?" Guy asked, his temper still worn a little thin. "Is that really your only consideration for a match? The degree to which it infuriates the parents. In that case, you could have accepted Yelverton and outraged everyone."

Even with Octavia on his arm, the thought of what might have

transpired between the two of them before now, what liberties Yelverton might have taken—

Octavia smiled up at him. Her eyes twinkled, and it felt as if they were back in Cambridgeshire. As if she were fourteen again, and Spencer were still alive. The anger vanished in an instant, and he resented that she had that effect on him.

Octavia batted her lashes at him again. “Consider how well we can infuriate the Prouttos, *and* how much joy it will bring to the happy couple. They’re much better matched than you and she would be.”

Guy shook his head. “No. No meddling. I shall merely nudge Thorne in Lady Clara’s direction and step out of the way myself.”

“If we don’t meddle, the Prouttos will continue to hound you endlessly.”

“In that case, how can I help?” Guy asked, a grin widening his face.

“That would be cheating, and I intend to win.” Octavia stopped abruptly. Her expression was unusually serious. She laid her hand on his arm, and the brilliance of her eyes softened. “How many women *have* you proposed to?”

Guy pointed to a long expanse where the gardener had dug a row of holes. “And that is where the new rose garden will go.”

Octavia swatted him again. “Answer me. How many times have you been hurt?”

She had done that twice now—brushed up against him, then let her hand linger on his upper arm. Had he imagined it? This was Octavia, after all. Why would she do that?

Guy tugged her forward. “We were talking about Thorne and his heartache, not mine.”

Octavia seemed reluctant to continue. She searched his face. “Truly, I spoke in haste back there, and I am sorry if I hurt you, old friend.”

“Not old. Mature. Well trained,” Guy said. “Not some young puppy.”

Octavia smiled. “I’m ready to return. Let the others finish on their own.”

Guy gratefully directed his steps toward the embassy. Octavia kept glancing over at him with a furrowed brow. The more she wanted to know about the puzzle his heart was, the more he would refuse to tell her. She must know that about him.

Octavia opened her mouth, but Guy asked a question before she could pursue the matter further. "Why are the Prouttons opposed to a match with Thorne? I thought well enough of him to keep him here and train him. He's not *entirely* useless."

She grinned at him. "Unlike some of your other undersecretaries?" She shrugged. "The Prouttons want a title for their only daughter. You trained Yelverton and kept him here as well, so *your* judgment can't entirely be trusted."

Guy choked back a laugh, but jealousy fought its way to the front. "Then why do you encourage him so much? Perhaps your judgment cannot be trusted, either, if you fell in love with him."

Octavia stumbled on some loose gravel, and Guy put an arm around her shoulders to catch her. She looked up at him. "I have never been in love with him or any of the others." Her compelling gaze and suddenly serious tone invited him to ask the unspoken question. He hardly dared, even with his arm around her shoulders and her sparkling eyes beguiling him.

This was the kind of look she could have been talking about, if he didn't know better. He might have believed this woman loved him, if it wasn't Octavia. He could hardly take in the difference. Nothing—and everything—had changed.

He slid his arm down to her waist, and she didn't move. He couldn't do this. Not with Spencer's little sister. His heart was still raw from their earlier conversation and the memory of all the women who had passed him over for someone else.

He could not court someone so young and so unprepared to be a duchess. He'd always considered the others carefully to ensure they could handle the burdens and responsibilities his life entailed.

Only the sound of birdsong broke the stillness of the air between them.

A playful smile curled her full, red lips. She said she'd never refuse him. Guy searched her face, and the look in her eyes dazzled him. Octavia inched closer and laid a hand on his arm. Her fingers played with the fabric of his coat.

Gravel crunched behind them. The others had turned around, too. He dropped his arm, and Octavia sighed as she dropped hers. They waited as the steps drew nearer. Her hands dangled at her side, an inch away from his, and he had to resist the urge to play with her fingers.

Yelverton's face was flushed. "Ah, there you are." He glanced

between Guy and Octavia.

Rushworth smiled apologetically at Guy. Lady Clara and Thorne continued their conversation, but Lady Clara regarded Octavia curiously.

Yelverton held his arm out to Octavia. "May I escort you back?"

The coward actually refused to meet Guy's eyes. He was hopeless as a suitor and completely useless as an undersecretary. The man needed to grow a spine.

But Octavia had always had a soft spot for puppies, especially the pathetic and lonely-looking ones. The change in her was instantaneous. A bright, false smile covered her face, and she took Yelverton's arm. "Of course. Please tell me the entire history of the gardens on our way back. I have been so curious."

She winked at Guy as she passed him, and he thought she did not walk quite as close to Yelverton as she had with him. Still, his arm felt empty, and he went from the soaring heights of hope to devastating loneliness. Once again, a woman had passed him over to choose another man. And Yelverton of all people?

Guy questioned Rushworth about investments in the Caribbean, but he kept an eye on Octavia, walking ahead of him. Her perfect silhouette curved in all the right places.

If he had ever been tempted to have a mistress, it would have been her, but he wanted a wife.

A footman rushed toward him, breathless, clutching a letter. "Your Grace."

Guy looked at the address on the envelope. *The French ambassador*. "Thank you." He tore it open and scanned the lines. The ambassador was now willing to attend the dinner and ball—the one that he had previously declined to attend.

There was a postscript. "*Please tell your charming friend to save a dance for me. I love the scent of violets.*"

Guy glanced up from his letter, just as Octavia turned and met his eye. He folded the note. "What scent did Piver give you?"

"Why?" Yelverton asked. Octavia's hand rested on his arm, and he covered it protectively."

"Violet. That cannot be what your urgent missive is about." The grin faded from Octavia's face. "Is it? I'm so sorry, truly, if that incident caused problems for you. I'll go return everything at once and explain."

"No, no," Guy waved her off. He hated to see her with

Yelverton, when she'd been walking like that with him only a moment ago. It made it hard to trust anything that had just happened between them. "Will you please wear that perfume to the state dinner and ball tomorrow?"

Octavia furrowed her brow. "There's a ball tomorrow? That's the subject of your note? Which scent I wear to the dinner?" She laughed and turned to Yelverton. "Perhaps I should telegraph the queen and ask her which dress to wear."

Yelverton laughed with her. Octavia could never take anything seriously.

Guy strode away toward the housekeeper's office. He had to ensure the menu and arrangements for tomorrow were in order. "Will you save a dance for the French ambassador?"

"Only the *French* ambassador?" Octavia called after him.

Guy turned on his heel. He saw the hurt in her eyes, and the crease between her brows. He scrambled to think what he had done. He shouldn't leave her so abruptly, even if he needed to prepare a thousand details. Even if she was clinging to the arm of a man who intended to propose to her a second time.

"Oh, I'd like a dance with you," Yelverton said.

"Of course, I must ask for one," Thorne said.

"I don't want to be left out," Rushworth agreed.

Guy blew out a breath. "And the *British* ambassador. Save one for *him*." He let his smile spread slowly as he locked eyes with her.

"For *you*," Octavia said, grinning. "Only one?"

Guy shook his head and marched up the lawn toward the kitchens. She'd be the death of him yet. Always teasing. Never in earnest.

Or was she? How could he tell when she danced with the other men and encouraged them equally? Had she been serious a moment ago in the gardens, or had Yelverton felt that way, too, before he proposed? How did Yelverton feel right now, with Octavia on his arm? How quickly would he propose again, without knowing that Octavia mocked him behind his back?

Guy hoped he could trust her, but did Octavia laugh and joke about *him* when she was with Yelverton?

He pounded across the lawn and put as much distance between himself and Octavia as he could. He kept his eyes locked on the reflection of the embassy windows in the distance.

Guy rubbed a hand over his face. Should he go out of his way to

try to spend time with Octavia tomorrow in order to win favor with the French ambassador? It couldn't possibly be enough to make anyone believe she favored him. Everyone would see her dancing with the other men, and the rumors would die as quickly as they had started, which should be a relief.

No. His wary counterpart would soon suspect the truth, anyway. The ambassador would be disappointed when he saw Octavia flirting with Yelverton tomorrow, but it was probably for the best. But had she actually helped with the recent progress he had made?

*Ridiculous.* His peace treaty shouldn't hinge on whom Octavia favored. Guy lengthened his stride until he was practically running across the lawn. He couldn't afford to let her visit turn the entire embassy upside down and derail his diplomacy.

Octavia was certainly not his mistress, and he shouldn't allow any rumors, whether or not they helped him. Anyone who paid attention to her could see that she encouraged Yelverton as much as she encouraged him.

Was he really comparing himself to her suitors? Guy tugged at his collar. He had promised himself never to consider her that way, but now he couldn't stop thinking about the idea.

Unless...he could avoid Octavia entirely and hope the ambassador believed that Guy and Octavia preferred discretion in their affairs.

But when had Octavia ever been discreet?



# Chapter 7

Octavia scanned the chess problem in the *Illustrated London News*. She'd love to try this in a game with Guy, but he never seemed to have time for her. Yesterday, he had spent the evening preparing for tonight's ball.

Didn't he have staff to do that? What were Yelverton, Thorne, and Rushworth here for? She pushed out a sigh and scanned the problem again.

*White mates in three moves.* How could white achieve a checkmate in only three moves?

Clara entered the nearly empty breakfast room but did not greet her. Octavia's mind began working on a different problem.

She grinned to herself. *Thorne mates in three moves.* How could she bring Clara and her parents around?

*A feint.* It always worked when she played chess with Guy. She would plan her strategy a few moves ahead. There was a dinner tonight. She could ask the duchess to seat her between Thorne and Lady Prouton. She would also need to finagle a way to get Thorne to ask her to dance first instead of Clara. He would have to take the third step on his own. Octavia smirked. She couldn't do *all* the work for him. She drummed her fingers on the breakfast table.

"I don't like that look," Guy said from the doorway.

She widened her eyes and batted her lashes innocently.

"That one is worse." Guy made his way to the sideboard, then filled his plate with sausage and eggs. He heaped on roasted potatoes and took a croissant.

"I'm examining the chess problem," Octavia said.

Guy settled across the table from her. "That explains it."

It didn't, but she'd already successfully fainted. She'd distracted Guy, her most discerning critic, from her true objective. She glanced casually around the room.

"Where is Mr. Thorne?" she asked.

Guy's fork stopped mid-way to his mouth.

Clara seated herself next to Guy. "He reads in the morning and opens his correspondence." She sized up Octavia. "Why?"

Octavia smiled sweetly at Clara. "I never answered him yesterday. I want to make sure he knows I am eager to dance with him at the ball tonight."

Clara pursed her lips, and Guy set down his fork.

Octavia returned her attention to the chess problem. Three moves. *If the knight captured the pawn—*

Guy cleared his throat, and Octavia glanced up from the newspaper. Clara watched her expectantly. "What?" she asked.

He nodded his head toward Clara.

"Am I being rude? I just want to read the newspaper. We always eat breakfast together like this, Guy. Why do I have to talk to you, just because we're in Paris?"

Clara stifled a laugh behind her napkin, then her face fell back into its haughty mask.

He groaned. "Octavia, really. Please remember to call me 'Your Grace,' now that we're at the embassy."

She looked back at the chess problem. "You don't call me 'Lady Octavia,'" she muttered to her plate. "You're just as informal as I am."

"And we're not at home. Make an effort to socialize." Guy stabbed a potato and took a bite.

"Yes, *Papa*," Octavia said. "Anything else?"

She shook her head and looked at Clara. "Honestly. Does Thorne ever treat you this way, just because he's known you so long?" She should try to break the ice with Clara.

Clara darted a glance toward the door.

"Your mother's not here," Octavia said, and leaned her elbows on the table. "You may speak honestly."

Guy groaned again. "Elbows off the table."

"See what I endure?" Octavia asked Clara. "You cannot seriously want to marry him."

Clara choked on her toast. Guy sunk his forehead into his hand.

"But tell me about Thorne," Octavia said.

Mama, the duchess, and Lady Prounton entered the breakfast room. Octavia straightened. "Promise me we'll talk later," she whispered. Clara carefully spread some raspberry jam on a bite of toast and did not acknowledge her in any way.

It might take more than three moves to match Thorne with Clara, but perhaps now she could return to her chess problem.

Octavia took a bite of a buttery croissant. The flakes melted in

her mouth, and she forgot everything else for a moment.

“Have you finished with the paper?” Guy asked.

“No.” Octavia set her breakfast aside and lowered her head. *Yes, if the knight took the pawn, then the second move would be—*

Mama whisked the paper from beneath her. “How many times have I asked you not to read the morning paper at the breakfast table?”

Guy reached for the paper and unfolded it. Octavia was certain he was studying the chess problem and would puzzle it out before she could.

Octavia finished her croissant and idly ate a few bites of fruit. Mama unfolded a letter and began to read. Guy could read the paper, and Mama could read letters, but she had to sit demurely and make idle conversation with Clara’s awful mother?

Very well. “What a beautiful morning, Lady Prouttton.”

“It is.”

Octavia directed her next insipid remark to Guy’s mother. “The weather is quite fine this morning, Your Grace.”

The duchess startled and nodded. Her Grace was trying to read the newspaper over Guy’s shoulder. She must hate this as much as Octavia did.

Octavia tapped her foot up and down, and Mama put a hand on her knee.

“Sorry, Mama.”

She had to interrupt Guy before he figured the puzzle out. “How was your swim?”

All the eyes at the table turned to her. Clara glanced between Octavia and Guy.

“What swim?” Lady Prouttton asked.

“You didn’t see him in his—” Mama began.

The duchess swiveled her attention to Octavia.

Guy set the newspaper down and answered her slowly. “Brisk. Still cold this early in the spring.” He picked up the newspaper and hid behind it again.

She was sure he was also hiding a smile. He knew what she was trying to do, and he didn’t even care. He would let everyone assume the worst.

Guy folded the paper and grinned at her.

“You finished the chess puzzle,” Octavia said.

“But let’s unravel this mystery. How did you know I went

swimming this morning?" He took another bite and slowly chewed, as if everyone wasn't staring at him now.

Octavia glared at him. "Now you admit it? After you complete the puzzle? You were content to let everyone think I had seen you —"

Mama and the duchess cleared their throats at the same time.

"—which I didn't, to be clear." Octavia grabbed the newspaper. She would take it back to her room and read it after breakfast. "Weather permitting, you either swim or row every morning to clear your head. Since your three undersecretaries are still abed," she glanced around the breakfast room, "and you never row alone, I concluded you must have gone swimming instead."

Mama breathed a sigh of relief. "So, you didn't actually go to the Seine to watch him."

Images flashed into Octavia's mind. Her eyes met Guy's, and she grinned. "Not today."

Lady Proutton sniffed and spoke quietly, but loud enough that everyone could hear her. "Really. I did think that Lady Shelford and her daughter would be expected to have a bit more decorum. Talking about unmentionables at the breakfast table."

All the air left the room, and no one made a sound. Octavia shouldn't tease Guy—His Grace—like they were old friends. But they were. How else was she to treat him?

She pushed her chair back from the dark mahogany table, and Lady Proutton's disapproving gaze followed her.

Mama spoke rapidly to fill the emptiness. "I've received a letter from Eleanor. Percy's boy is doing well. He's barely three months old, you know, and they've named him after my dear husband. It seems they're calling him Spencer, though. His middle name. The scamp. Just a wee thing and giving them fits."

First, Octavia had spoken too freely and offended the Prouttons, and now Mama was speaking of Spencer. *Again*. Octavia reached the doorway without spilling a tear. "Excuse me." She curtsied. She was supposed to do that, wasn't she? Her mind felt foggy right now.

Lord Yelverton brushed against her as she pushed through the doorway. His light brown hair was perfectly tousled, and his hazel eyes smiled down at her, obviously encouraged by the accidental physical contact.

Octavia searched over his shoulder for Thorne. Sure enough, he

and Rushworth were beside Yelverton. Thorne's pale hair was just as handsomely and artistically disheveled as his friend's. "There you are! Do promise you'll save me the first dance, Mr. Thorne. I can't think of anyone I'd rather begin the ball with than you." She dimpled her smile at his concerned grey eyes and moved along the corridor as quickly as she could.

She could still help Clara and Thorne tonight, even if she had just humiliated herself.

Tears threatened to leak from the corners of her eyes. Octavia picked up the skirt of her day dress and ran out the back door and into the gardens. Why was the entire building covered in windows? People would be able to see her.

She dropped her skirts and resumed a respectable pace. Was her conversation so very different from discussing sea-bathing? What if they took an expedition to the Atlantic coast? Wouldn't they see Guy in his bathing suit then?

She tilted her chin up and forced herself to stroll casually toward the closest hedge, where she could hide from Lady Proutton and everyone else, even if she couldn't hide from herself. The last few days had been a disaster, and Guy had no qualms about telling her so. Neither did Mama or Lady Proutton. She never knew what the duchess was thinking, but Her Grace was probably horrified.

And the staff whispered behind her back. Every time she wandered through the marble-tiled halls, she heard a maid or a footman or someone else giggling.

She stumbled on some gravel and righted herself. *Privacy*. There must be a bench nearby. She stopped between two rows of neatly clipped hedges. An ornate iron-wrought seat was tucked around a corner. If she slipped inside the bower, no one would see her.

Octavia collapsed on the metal bench and let out a sigh. Her maid was going to have a fit. Mud from Pharaoh two days ago and dirt from the garden today.

The thought of Pharaoh pushed the tears over the edge. They spilled down her cheeks.

A man's hand offered her a perfectly starched handkerchief.

*Not Yelverton*. She couldn't deal with his simpering affection right now. Octavia ignored the pristine cloth.

A man's broad frame pushed its way onto the bench beside her.

"I came out here to be alone," Octavia said.

"Then stop crying," Guy retorted.

She swiveled her head to the side sharply. The surprise stopped the tears for a moment.

“That’s better.” He wiped her cheeks, as if she were still a child.

Octavia swallowed, and her mind raced. Her thoughts couldn’t keep pace with her emotions. She didn’t want Guy to see her like this. She’d already been embarrassed by Lady Proutton’s rebuke.

“She’s insufferable,” he said. “Tell me you have a plan to ensure she will never be my mother-in-law.”

Octavia laughed in spite of herself.

“Your machinations are far too obvious,” Guy said. “The Prouttons will never fall for your strategy.” He scoffed. “Flirting with Thorne to make Lady Clara jealous.” He nudged her. “It will never work. You’ll make him fall in love with you, too, like the rest of us.”

Octavia grabbed his handkerchief and dabbed at the corner of her eyes to clear the tears. A distant part of herself heard him and wondered what he meant.

“She should never have spoken about you that way,” Guy said softly. “That was ill-mannered of *her*.”

Octavia crushed the starched piece of cloth. “Yes, but a discussion of swimming suits at the breakfast table? I must learn to mind my manners.”

Guy pushed out a breath. “You do keep things interesting.”

She glanced at him as they sat side by side on the bench. The curved latticework made the seat look like an overgrown rose bush. The towering hedges and early morning shade gave her the confidence to unburden herself.

“Women should be allowed to speak about the same subjects as men. Spencer would have enjoyed the conversation,” Octavia said. “He would have described his bathing suit in detail and made Lady Proutton blush, and no one would have scolded him.” Why did Mama bring him up so much? No amount of talking about him would bring him back. Her chin trembled.

“Please don’t do that,” Guy said.

“Don’t do what?” she asked.

Octavia pushed his crumpled handkerchief back into his vest pocket. Guy caught her hands in his and drew them into his lap. “That thing with your chin. Whenever we talk about Spencer, your chin wobbles.”

Octavia’s eyes felt moist again. Guy let go of her hands, took out

the wrinkled handkerchief, and gave it back to her. She sniffed and tried to stop her chin. She felt a quiver in her chest, and then she was crying.

Guy sighed. "Do we have to do this?" He lowered her head onto his shoulder, then wrapped an arm around her. "Lady Prouton isn't worth these tears. Especially not if she'd seen how magnificent my bathing suit actually is."

Octavia took rapid breaths between words. "It. Isn't. Her." She let herself cry in the warmth of Guy's embrace. She felt guilty for enjoying the comfort, since he was clearly annoyed with her emotions, but she couldn't stop the tears once she had started.

"Then what is it?" Guy asked. The question was halfway between an interrogation and an exasperation. He nudged her chin up to look at him, and the anger softened. His frustration appeared to be replaced by a shadow of Spencer's irreverent humor.

"Are you sad that you didn't see my bathing suit? It's maroon with navy stripes. Quite splendid. What other details would you like to know?" He puffed out his chest and arched an eyebrow, almost exactly as her brother would have done.

"I. Miss. Spencer," Octavia said, and she curled onto Guy's chest. She closed her eyes as a fresh wave of tears overcame her. The soggy handkerchief was useless by now.

He held her as he had when Spencer died. The tears flowed freely at the memories she had pushed away for so long.

"I miss the hunting lodge. I miss Papa and his hounds. I miss walking from my grounds over to yours. You are never home at your estate anymore, even when I am." Her chin trembled, and she tried to stop the wobble. "I miss England, and I even miss Percy. I wish everything was the way it used to be."

Guy rested his hand gently on her back. His warmth filled the empty corners of her heart. "You want me to spoil you, indulge you, and never scold you again."

Octavia nodded. "Like you used to. Like Spencer and Percy used to."

"When you were an adorable seven-year-old girl."

"Before you and Percy and everyone decided everything was wrong with me." The tears came harder now.

And this time he stroked her hair. His gentle touch soothed her, and the tears subsided. Guy's thumb lightly brushed the tears from her cheek, and she gazed up at him.

"I hate it when you cry," he said softly. His hand cupped her cheek, and she leaned into the reassuring comfort of his touch.

She rested in the circle of his arms, but it was different than it had been three years ago. Guy pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I hate that your Papa and Spencer died." His eyes traveled over her face, and Octavia stilled. The feel of his lips lingered on her skin.

"I hate it when you're sad," Guy said quietly. He seemed to be holding his breath. Or was she?

"I hate that it's my fault you think anything is wrong with you." He tilted her chin up. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, except that you believe something is wrong with you."

Octavia became aware of the sensation of his body against hers. She shifted to look up at him, dropping the handkerchief and putting one hand on his chest. His thumb brushed her cheek again, and she studied every detail of his face.

Her pain changed to longing of an entirely different kind. Octavia wound her other arm around his waist to bring herself closer to him on the bench.

Nearby voices alerted her that someone was coming, and Clara's voice rang out distinctly. "Oh, Lord Yelverton, I fear I left my shawl in the breakfast room. Would you be so kind..."

Octavia still hurt from the bout of crying, and she ached to fill the new hunger that had flared. She knew she should exert herself, but it felt like moving through sludge and shadows.

Guy straightened on the cool metal bench. Octavia left her head on his warm shoulder. He withdrew his arm from her slowly, but she kept her arm loosely threaded through his.

Clara came around the corner noisily, as if warning them of her presence. Her downcast eyes and flushed cheeks made it obvious that she had already seen them together.

Octavia straightened and forced a smile to her face.

Clara looked embarrassed. "I came to see if you were distressed. My mother is beyond all belief. I am so sorry."

Octavia didn't have the energy to pretend right now. "Thank you for sending Yelverton away. I needed a moment alone."

Clara stared pointedly at Guy.

"We are old friends," Octavia said. "Please excuse any liberties I take with my—" She glanced at Guy. What were they to each other?

"She wouldn't want to marry me anyway, now that you've warned her what I'm like at breakfast," Guy said. He smiled at



Octavia, and something intangible sparked in the air.

Clara looked between the two of them. "I did not realize the degree of intimacy between the two of you."

Guy laughed. "No one does. Not even me."

Even through the dullness of grief, Octavia could feel the pull of his humor. She shot him a look. "You see what I mean. You only have yourself to blame for my reputation as your mistress."

Clara didn't seem to know what to think of their banter.

Octavia stood, finding the strength to let go of her grief and Guy and the past for one moment. She brushed off her skirt. "Come. Enough of this. Guy—His Grace—has a busy day, and we have a ball to prepare for."

He blinked into the sun rising over the hedges and half-blinding him. Octavia knew he would not leave, no matter how uncomfortable he was, until she reassured him. She put her hand out toward him. "Thank you for letting me cry."

Guy bowed and held her fingers lightly in his own. "You're saving a dance for the British ambassador tonight?"

A corner of her heart cracked open, and her lips curved into a smile. "Just one."

He pressed her hand to his lips. "Until tonight."

Their eyes met, and she felt a thrill of excitement. Something had nearly happened between them; if only they hadn't been interrupted.

Guy left to attend to his duties, whatever those were. He was always so vague.

Octavia sighed and left the seclusion of the hedges. She moved into the sunlight and onto the pathway leading back to the embassy. Clara's steps beside her were measured and controlled. Her dress was immaculate. Everything about her was disciplined.

"You and he would never make a good match, Clara. He needs someone to challenge him, and I suspect that you are too intimidated by his title to stand up to him. Your parents will have to live with that disappointment. But tell me what *you* want in a match. I am sure you only pursue him on your mother's orders."

Clara kept her eyes on the path. "You are the only friend who would dare tell me such things so openly."

Octavia linked her arm with Clara's. "Do you mind? Tell me if I am wrong about your feelings toward Guy."

Clara considered her with a bemused expression. "It is a

welcome change. It's been too long since nursing school."

"I was hoping you'd say that." Octavia nearly skipped as she tried to hurry Clara up the path. "Now, about Thorne. He's probably still in the breakfast room. Tell me how long you've known each other..."

# Chapter 8

Guy huffed out a long sigh as his mother hovered in the doorway. Her quiet voice somehow filled his office. "It's not raining at the moment."

He set down his pen. "You're right."

"The sun's come out."

Guy looked pointedly at the stacks of reports and unopened letters.

Mother persisted. "Some fresh air might clear your head."

He straightened each pile on his desk. "I was focusing quite well before you came to visit."

Her wounded face was reprimand enough.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's come over me."

"That's why you need to go outside," Mother said.

Guy blew out a deep breath. "I have one chance to talk to the French ambassador tonight, and I need to create a list of essential arguments before dinner. I've managed to avoid his calls for my resignation so far."

Mother wandered over to a window and tapped the glass. "You need to consult your undersecretaries."

Guy scoffed and shuffled a few papers. "Lawn games? You expect me to trust the future of our nation to men who chose to set up archery targets instead of studying missives from the Foreign Office?"

Mother set a hand on his shoulder. "They're filling their time with frivolity because you don't give them anything else to do."

"I don't give them anything to do because they fill their time with frivolity." He met Mother's gaze. "What is this about? You've never insisted I see daylight before."

His mother paused in the doorway. "You're working too hard."

"I always work this hard. I don't have a choice. I'm overwhelmed and cannot keep up, no matter how little I sleep. This has always been my lot. Father worked like this, too. You know it's our duty."

"And he died before you turned twenty-five," Mother said softly.

"Shelford and Octavia lost their father only a year after you lost yours. Let's see if you can make it to sixty, since neither of them did."

Guy pushed back from the desk to drape an arm around his diminutive mother. "Very well." He led her out of his office. "Will five minutes in the sun ease your heart?" He smiled down at her.

"Half an hour." She glided down the hall beside him, serene and unmovable. His mother was tiny and seemed timid, but she had the kind of backbone that Yelverton lacked.

"We'll see," Guy said. "I'm not on death's door yet." He paused at the back door of the embassy.

"Everything is in order for the dinner and the ball," Mother said. "I've checked with the cook, housekeeper, and head of staff, and they tell me that you have, too."

"Ten minutes." He bowed to her, then headed out toward the stables. If he had to leave his work behind to assuage his mother's fears, he'd rather spend the time with Pharaoh than Yelverton. At least one of the puppies was well-trained.

But Pharaoh's kennel was empty. *Octavia*. He glanced hopefully around the side yard, but she wasn't anywhere nearby.

Surely, she hadn't. Not when the dog could give birth at any moment. What if Pharaoh ran away from Octavia to start nesting in an obscure part of the embassy grounds? He'd never find the dog or ensure the pups were safely delivered.

Guy rounded the corner from the stables and made his way to the lawn, where Octavia and Clara watched the men competing at archery. *She had*. Octavia had taken the Great Dane back to the great green, where it could wander off at a moment's notice, even though he'd explained that Pharaoh was expecting a litter of puppies.

Pharaoh, however, sat obediently at her side, the perfect model of decorum today, unlike Octavia. The dog was either too tired to move or too devoted to wander off. Meanwhile, Octavia lounged in a chair beneath a shady oak, far too casual. Lady Clara looked as stiff as a statue beside her. He could see Octavia's enthusiastic cheers for each man as he shot an arrow, while Lady Clara hardly reacted.

How could Octavia ever become his duchess? The familiar tug of war began within him. He felt irresistibly drawn toward her, but she could never represent the duchy as formally as Society dictated.

She was so young, and her generous heart and impulsive nature would never change.

But Lady Clara's stiffness was so unnatural and unappealing.

"Your Grace!" Octavia yelled across the lawn.

Yelverton's bow dipped, and his arrow missed the target completely. It drove into the soft earth.

She motioned Guy over. "Come sit with us."

Mother must have known Octavia was outside, too. Was she playing matchmaker? Guy crossed the closely clipped grass to join her and Lady Clara.

Rushworth and Thorne looked around. "Care to join us?" Thorne asked.

Yelverton threw back his chest and leaned on his bow, like a bronze in a museum. Or a fledgling Greek god. Guy had to decide quickly, and he did not intend to spend his time watching Yelverton trying to flirt with Octavia.

"I was hoping my undersecretaries would help me get acquainted with some documents before the dinner tonight," Guy said. "I came outside to ask for help."

Yelverton glanced at Octavia. "Now?"

She sprang up from her seat. "I'll take a turn with the bow, if you're finished."

Yelverton's face flushed bright red. "I thought you enjoyed watching us."

"She's got deadly aim. Don't let her touch a bow," Guy warned. "She'll put you all to shame." The last thing he wanted to watch was Yelverton wrapping his arms around Octavia to help her shoot an arrow. She didn't need the help, but she wouldn't refuse. Would she?

He'd spent the day worrying about that particular question. *Would* she refuse Yelverton, if he asked her to marry him again? After his time with Octavia this morning, Guy couldn't stop thinking about what might come next.

And whether she treated everyone that way or only him.

"If you won't let me shoot, then I shall demonstrate the self-defense I learned instead." Octavia approached Guy.

He held his ground, even if his instincts warned him. "I would like to speak with my undersecretaries privately."

She planted herself in front of him. Her feet were set firmly with one leg in front of the other. She raised her fists to either side of her

face. "Then you shall have to make me leave."

Thorne and Rushworth laughed.

"I'd be wary, Woodford. It'll be easier to include her in your secrets," Thorne said, with a hint of admiration in his voice. "Lady Octavia's form looks fine, indeed."

Beneath the oak tree, Lady Clara straightened in her chair.

Guy held out his hand. "Please, Octavia, not right now."

In an instant, she twisted his wrist and pulled his thumb back. He yelped in pain. She swept his leg from beneath him, and he crumpled.

But she hadn't let go of his wrist, and his momentum pulled her down, too. Octavia landed directly on top of him, their faces an inch apart. Pharaoh clumsily rose to her feet and growled at Guy. His own dog.

Octavia's eyes widened, then she burst into laughter. She rolled to the side, pushed herself up, and dusted off her dress. "Here, girl," she called. "I am well. I learned how to fall." She tickled Pharaoh behind the ears and offered Guy a hand. He pushed his way up on his own.

She looked unabashed. "Do you want to see what else we learned?" Octavia grinned. "What about you, Clara? Shall I teach you how to defend yourself against grumpy dukes and thieves?"

Yelverton edged closer to Octavia, as if hopeful she might fall on him.

Guy looked at him. "No. You're not going to demonstrate on anyone or teach anyone." His heart still pounded from the close contact and the shock of her hands on him. He leaned in close so that only Octavia could hear him. "What if the Prouttos had seen us? It's bad enough that everyone else did. Do you have any idea how scandalous that demonstration was?"

Her face fell. She whispered angrily, "I didn't expect you to pull me down. You're about a thousand times stronger than Alice Loughton."

Guy glanced around. Lady Clara's lips were pressed into a thin line, and Yelverton's face had flushed bright red again. Thorne and Rushworth looked amused. How many servants had seen this? How quickly would this story add fuel to the other flames of gossip?

His reputation could go to the devil. It already had, and Octavia's chin threatened to wobble.

"Well done," Guy said loudly. "Impressive skill. Where did you

learn that?"

She threw back her shoulders and smiled at him. "Kempton, Colonel Loughton, Percy, Lord Chelmsford and his brother. I ran off some men with knives."

Guy shook his head. "What did you say?"

"In London," Octavia said. "We were attacked—"

"You never should have been without a chaperone," Yelverton interjected. "I'm always happy to accompany you."

Octavia smiled sweetly at him. "Thank you."

That wasn't a direct answer. Was she evading Yelverton? She couldn't truly wish to hang on his arm all the time.

But Yelverton shot him a triumphant look. He thought Octavia's answer meant something. A second proposal must be coming any moment. Why didn't she tell him to clear off? "She doesn't require your protection or anyone's," Guy said. "Octavia can clearly defend herself."

Yelverton stepped closer to her. "But a gentleman never puts a lady into a position where she needs to worry about danger. Shall I walk you to the ball tonight?"

Guy swallowed a growl. "She can make her way from one end of the embassy to another without incident," he muttered.

Octavia glanced at his scowl before smiling at Yelverton. "What a kind offer. What chivalry. How thoughtful. I would love that, especially since *no one else offered*." She flashed a meaningful look at Guy.

He drew a deep breath. Leaving work to come outside had been a colossal mistake. He needed to focus, and his undersecretaries obviously needed more work. "Octavia, may I ask you and Lady Clara to return Pharaoh to the stables for me? I am happy to accompany, if you'd like, but I trust that you are capable of managing my dog *on your own*."

He was the duke. He gave orders, and people did what he asked. Except Octavia. Her face was deepening into that mulish, stubborn look he knew so well. "But we haven't finished with archery yet," she protested. She tilted her head and cast her eyes down to the ground like an innocent little angel.

Yelverton cradled his bow, clearly eager to start another round.

*Fine.* Yelverton and the others might fall for Octavia's sad looks, but he was immune to them.

Well. He was not.

He was immune to her insincerity and manipulation, and she was in no distress right now. She simply wanted to get her own way, and he couldn't stand watching her flirt with Yelverton when he wanted her attention all for himself.

"Enjoy the spectacle," Guy muttered. He gestured toward Yelverton. "Go ahead, men, if you wish to finish this round. I'll return Pharaoh myself."

She glanced sideways. "Aren't you going to participate?" She laid a hand on his arm, and Guy noticed how long she let it stay there. "You need more diversions. You work without ceasing. It's quite unhealthy."

"Have you been talking to Mother?" Guy asked.

Octavia's brow furrowed in adorable creases. "Her Grace? No. Why? Did she also want you to join us in archery?"

Guy shook his head. She hadn't been flirting with Yelverton. She'd been trying to help him. Or was she doing both? Was he really so insecure that he had completely misunderstood her intentions?

Probably. "One round."

Octavia's face lit with a smile.

He motioned to a footman, who retrieved another bow, while a second footman rushed to set up a fourth target. He tested the bow's strength, lined up an arrow, and let it fly.

Slightly to the left, but still on the edge of the bull's eye. He waited for the others to shoot, then he notched an arrow and pulled back until the string was taut. Sounds faded and the world narrowed to one point on the target. He held the bow steady, then let go. Slightly to the right.

He went through the motions again. He could feel himself getting in the rhythm. He selected an arrow. Notched it. Held it steady until the shaking stopped, then felt the twang of the string against his wrist. The third arrow landed dead center.

Guy grinned and leaned over to select another arrow. He rifled through the arrows to find precisely the right one.

"How much longer are we going?" Yelverton's voice snapped his concentration.

Guy looked over. All three men were watching him. Yelverton broadened his stance and folded his arms across his chest.

"Five more arrows," Guy said. "Then the women get a turn. I'm sure they'd like to do more than watch." He notched another arrow



and let it fly. Dead center again. He had forgotten how much he loved archery.

When he finished, he went to inspect the target. The arrows clustered neatly in the center, with one off to the left and one off to the right. He pulled them out, walked back to Octavia, and offered her the bow.

She was bouncing her leg up and down. "Thank you." She motioned to Lady Clara. Guy stationed himself between Octavia and Yelverton, so she could shoot her arrows without any interference or fawning.

Her aim was true, as it always was, and she nearly matched his grouping. Octavia threw a grin over her shoulder at him when she finished. Lady Clara was shooting a last arrow, and Thorne and Rushworth were watching.

Yelverton hovered nearby with his chest puffed out. His stance looked more like a peacock preening than a man aiming an arrow at a target.

Octavia rested her hand lightly on Guy's arm, and once again the world narrowed to one single point. *Her*. "Isn't this more enjoyable than writing reports?"

"But less necessary," Guy said. "I have stacks of work to do."

Octavia's smile widened. "You have to eat and sleep and occasionally engage in some sport other than swimming. Spending time with me is entirely necessary."

He shook his head. "It's certainly fun."

A rare moment of vulnerability flashed across her face. "You need me, Guy. You need to take breaks."

The teasing retorts died on his lips. He wanted her in his life, but where did she fit? He spoke the truth without thinking. "That's why I have Pharaoh."

Octavia stared at him. "I see." She swallowed.

Beside them, Thorne was complaining. "It was nearly in the center."

"Our deal was one dance for every bull's eye, Reggie." Lady Clara was wiping the dirt from her gloves. "And you didn't hit one."

Yelverton approached Octavia. "I hit two," he said hopefully.

Her smile didn't reach her eyes. "Then we shall dance twice."

"I don't think this is the right way to determine dances," Rushworth said.

"Why not?" Yelverton asked. He'd sandwiched Octavia between

Guy and himself.

"Because Woodford hit five," Rushworth said, and laughed.

"Six," Thorne corrected him, and smirked at Yelverton.

It was actually seven, if they'd seen exactly where the arrows landed, but Guy wasn't going to correct them.

Guy doubted that Octavia wanted even one dance with him, but he tried to catch her eye. He gazed at her as if no one else existed in the whole world. As if no one else was watching them. He had one look to tell her that he wished they had never been interrupted this morning, that he couldn't wait to finish what they had nearly started, that he was a fool.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. "Will you save a dance for me tonight?" Out of the corner of his eye, Guy could feel Yelverton's scowl. "*You* outshine my Great Dane in many ways." He let the smile build in his eyes and hoped it would burn her with the memory of their last encounter, when he had needed her more than anything in the world.

Octavia caught her breath. Recognition flared in the depths of her eyes, and her fingers curled around his. She nodded. "I'll *try* to remember to save a dance, but I cannot promise anything." A grin slowly spread across her face, and she left her hand resting in his. "The others have won so many dances."

Guy reluctantly released her hand.

Octavia raised her fingers to her lips and whistled an ear-splitting sound. Guy winced as his ears rang from the sound.

"Pharaoh!" The dog obediently joined her. "Clara, shall we change into our dinner gowns?"

Lady Clara excused herself.

"You know," Octavia threw over her shoulder. "I do like Pharaoh more than you, *Your Grace*."

"One dance," Guy said.

"Perhaps," Octavia yelled, as she drew further and further away. "If you behave better than the *puppy*." She gestured toward Pharaoh, then grinned at him.

They both knew that she really meant Yelverton. He could see the twinkle in her eye all the way across the field.

## Chapter 9

Guy shook his head. Why did he love such an infuriatingly complex woman? And why didn't he know how to talk to her? Smoldering looks weren't getting him very far, and he had come dangerously close to breaking her heart with his honesty a minute ago.

As soon as Octavia and Lady Clara were out of sight, Thorne collapsed on a chair. "I don't understand Clara. Every other woman in London falls at my feet, and she hardly notices me."

"And you're so humble," Guy muttered under his breath. "*Every* woman in London?" He glanced at Octavia's retreating form.

"It's good for you," Rushworth said, and seated himself.

Yelverton set the bow against the oak. "Six arrows in the center?"

"I'm three or four years older than you, aren't I?" Guy asked.

"Yes, but Lady Octavia beat him just as handily," Rushworth said.

Yelverton collapsed into a chair. "I'll never be good enough for her."

Guy regarded the other men. It had been so long since he'd spent time with his own friends. Almost a year since any of his friends had visited, and he'd only visited London briefly a couple of times in between. His undersecretaries had arrived only a week or so before the assassination attempt, so there hadn't been much time to get to know them. They'd been dealing with emergencies almost since the moment they arrived.

Guy didn't have time to relax. He had to plan for the invasion of England by France while training his worthless assistants, who had dragged their feet and shown little initiative. Thorne showed the most promise, if Guy could win his trust and friendship. Perhaps if he got to know him better, since he was stuck outside anyway.

"Lady Clara seems like a good friend, when she does notice you," Guy said casually.

Thorne snorted. "Not as friendly as Lady Octavia."

They studied each other. "We are old friends," Guy said carefully. "We're comfortable with each other."

This time Rushworth snickered. "Thorne would kill to be as 'comfortable' and 'friendly' with Lady Clara as you are with Lady Octavia."

This could also be useful to win his bet with Octavia. "Why aren't you? You've known her nearly as long."

Thorne leaned forward in his chair. "She doesn't pay me any heed. She's kind enough, but it's like..." He seemed to be searching for the right word.

To his chagrin, Guy wondered if Octavia was right. "She doesn't see you? She looks right through you?"

"Yes!" Thorne said. "Have you experienced it, too? I might as well be a part of the landscape or an old sofa. I'm always in the background."

"Isabella ignores me," Rushworth said. "I'm sure it's intentional on her part. She insists on keeping me firmly established as a friend."

"Yes!" Yelverton pounded his fist on the table. "How many times have I proposed to one woman or another, only to find she feels 'brotherly affection' for me?" He dropped his head into his hands. "I genuinely hoped Lady Octavia felt more. But, obviously, seeing her with you—" Yelverton cut off midsentence and glanced sideways at Guy.

"Perhaps if you waited until after the first dance before you proposed," Rushworth said.

"Three times," Thorne said.

Yelverton glared at him.

"Well, you asked." Thorne shrugged. "You've proposed three times, and they scarcely knew your name before you declared yourself. Love takes time. You cannot expect them to accept you merely because you have a title."

"And handsome friends," Rushworth said, grinning.

Yelverton narrowed his eyes, but Thorne and Rushworth grinned back at him.

"If you don't want answers, don't ask," Rushworth said and smirked.

Guy cleared his throat. "I daresay you are aware I tried to court Octavia's sister-in-law."

Rushworth tilted his head back and laughed. "You didn't."

"I didn't feel any affection for her, and she felt no affection for me. I have tried to pursue too many matches like that." He had

evaded Yelverton's implied question about Octavia, and perhaps the man would drop the subject.

Thorne nodded. "Is it hopeless? Will I always be a friend to her and nothing more?"

Again, the three men turned to him. "Why are you looking at me?" Guy asked.

"Well," Yelverton said. The flush on his face returned. "Obviously."

"Just say it," Rushworth told his friend.

Yelverton cleared his throat. "Yes. You seem to have moved far past friendship with Lady Octavia."

Guy blew out a deep breath. Yelverton insisted on discussing their rivalry, but he wouldn't provoke the puppy. He needed to maintain a working relationship with Yelverton. "I wouldn't necessarily say that. Octavia has only been here a few days, and it's been almost two years since I've spent a lot of time with her. We're as comfortable with each other as we've always been."

Thorne scoffed. "Let's compare. Does she touch you playfully on the arm? Does she find excuses to be close to you? Does she gaze deep into your eyes?" He batted his blond lashes rapidly. "Or does she avoid eye contact with you at all costs? Does she suddenly turn deaf when you try to talk to her? Does she ask for your help in a friendly manner and tell you about the other men she hopes will court her?"

Guy was silent. Octavia had batted him on the shoulder and let her hand linger. She'd let him hold her. She'd fallen asleep on him, and then she'd stayed on him even after she'd woken up.

They didn't need to know any of that.

"Clara doesn't look me in the eye and hardly touches me when we walk together. She's friendlier to her grandfather than she is to me. Trust me. I am acquainted with her grandfather."

Guy nodded.

"Does she find ways to be alone with you, or does she invite others along when you thought you had finally figured out a way to steal a private moment with her?"

Again, Guy did not think his undersecretaries needed to know how many times he and Octavia had crossed the lines of impropriety since he'd gone to Italy.

"Even when she comes to talk to me, Clara goes out of her way to include others in our conversation. She makes sure I am aware of

how inadequate her parents find me.”

Even Yelverton and Rushworth looked sorry for Thorne now.

Thorne ran a hand through his pale, tousled hair. “Does she tell you that you’re like a brother? Does she tell you how perfect you are for someone else?”

Octavia had never done any of those things. She told him that she *didn’t* want to marry the men who had proposed to her and that she hoped Yelverton would stop trying to court her. But was she telling the truth?

She didn’t think anyone was good enough for him. In fact, she was jealous of Lady Clara, of Estelle, of anyone who took his time away from her. She wanted him all to herself, and always had, since she was a child.

Was that the expectation of a spoiled girl, now grown up, who assumed he would always give her his full attention, or was it the other kind of jealousy a woman felt?

Guy realized the men expected a reply. “My relationship with Octavia is indeed different from yours with Lady Clara.”

Yelverton snorted this time. He folded his arms across his chest. “That’s an understatement. Six dances.”

“I didn’t come outside to discuss Octavia,” Guy said. “I shall dance once with her, Yelverton, if I am lucky.” He met his glare. “I am the Duke of Woodford first, the British ambassador second, and then, if fortune smiles on me, I am allowed to indulge myself in a dance that is purely for enjoyment.”

Yelverton’s pout could nearly match Octavia’s.

Training these men was going to be worse than he thought. “You are a peer. Duty comes first. Personal interests come second.”

Yelverton avoided his eyes and began to fiddle with a loose string on his cuff.

If he wouldn’t listen, he could still try to help his friends.

“I have two questions for you, Thorne.”

Thorne glanced up from studying the grass.

“Does her parents’ approval matter to you?”

Thorne laughed wryly. “A great deal. Clara does what her mama asks, and only a titled gentleman will do for their daughter. I envy you. No one disapproves of a duke.”

“You’d be surprised.” Guy thought of Lady Shelford’s knowing looks. “It’s a demanding life, and there are many critics. Question number two. If her parents approved, would Lady Clara’s feelings

toward you change?"

Thorne tilted his head back to watch the clouds drifting by. "I have no sense of how she really feels. She puts up so many barriers between us."

"We are in the business of diplomacy," Guy said. "If anyone should be able to win over parents or a woman to get married, it ought to be the four of us."

The men all laughed. "Indeed," Yelverton said. "And yet, here we are."

Thorne stood up and began to pace near the chairs. "I assumed it was hopeless."

Guy joined him and clapped him on the back. "Does she push you away because she does not care for you or because her parents don't approve?"

Thorne's eyes lit up. "What if she secretly adores me and cannot stand the agony of not marrying me because her parents forbid it?"

Rushworth threw back his head and laughed.

Thorne put a hand over his heart. "No wonder she pushes me away. I've secretly broken her heart. Poor thing."

Yelverton shook his head. "Seriously? Who has the broken heart? You or her?"

Obviously, Yelverton did.

Thorne still had so much to learn about women. All of his undersecretaries did. "I will tell you a secret that too many men fail to grasp. Women can be perfectly content without us." Guy held up his hands. "I know, it is shocking, but their sole and utter happiness does not always depend on us, even when their livelihood does."

Rushworth nodded. "Isabella is completely fine without me—or so she says. She seems to be thriving alone as a wealthy widow, an estate owner, and a mother to her son. I want her to require some assistance, and she insists she does not require anything. I have no idea what the truth of the matter is, so I must believe her that I am completely unnecessary."

Guy studied the archery targets. "My goal is to convince a woman to allow me into her life in the hopes that I can make it so much richer and better than it already is, even if she is sufficient on her own. I imagine it will take a good deal of effort and a vast portion of luck." He looked around at the others, suddenly serious. "But I don't imagine that I am the key to her happiness. She must already be happy on her own without me."

“I’ll settle for being a small part of her life, if she’ll let me in,” Thorne said with a sheepish smile. “So, who’s going to help me strategize?”

“Politics first and romance second. Let’s meet in the Blue Room in half an hour. Gather your papers. We don’t have much time left to prepare for this evening.”

“Remember when a ball used to simply be a ball?” Yelverton asked. “Now it’s a complicated series of assignments—people I must speak with, favors to ask, approval to seek, arguments to avoid, and women to flatter.”

Rushworth left the shade of the oak to join Guy. “That sounds like every ball I’ve ever attended. Nothing has changed, except that Woodford gives us the assignments and there are fewer matchmaking mamas. It’s easier here than it ever was in London.”

Guy gestured toward the embassy. “Shall we return? What if I make your first assignment tonight a simple one, Yelverton? Help Thorne look good. Make sure to let Lady Clara’s parents overhear a conversation about his merits.”

Yelverton knit his brow. “I thought you said we’d discuss politics first.”

Guy smirked at him. “We are. What do you think marriage is?”



# Chapter 10

Octavia raised her voice loud enough for the entire dining room to hear. “Really, Mr. Thorne? I didn’t realize your grounds were so extensive. They must be the same size as our grounds at Shelford.”

Thorne’s grey eyes twinkled back at her. He flicked his napkin and dabbed at the corners of his mouth.

She whispered, “Speak up. The Prouttons cannot hear your answers unless you raise your voice.”

Thorne answered in an impressive voice. “I shall have to visit Shelford to compare the size of our properties. I would love to hunt with your brother. We should get a party together.”

Octavia lowered her voice and whisper-hissed at him. “I am not inviting you to a house party. If we make plans together, it will sound as though we’re really courting.” Her eyes grew round, and she lowered her voice to the smallest whisper “Are you trying to make Clara jealous?”

The edges of Thorne’s mouth lifted in a slow smile. Right. It was supposed to look like she favored him, not Guy.

“I do love a hunting party, but then we would have to wait all the way until August for our house party. Could you leave for the planting this spring, or does your steward manage things well enough? You must have an army of stewards and secretaries to oversee your property.”

She took a petite bite and waited for Thorne to impress the Prouttons. Of course, if she feigned interest in him or pretended to arrange a house to which they were not invited, she hoped it might provoke a little interest in Lady Prouton, too.

And her daughter. Lady Clara could not be as indifferent as she seemed. She gripped her knife rather too tightly for someone who didn’t care.

Guy’s face was tight, too. He wasn’t enjoying this dinner at all, poor man. He was too busy talking to his diplomatic guests further down, near the center of the table.

The French ambassador smiled at her. His wife was stunning. *Marguerite*? If that was indeed her name, who was the mysterious

Estelle who seemed to know all the workings of the French diplomatic service?

Octavia glanced up and down the length of the dining table while Thorne talked. Guy and his mother had welcomed so many fashionable guests, and she hadn't met any of them.

Thorne paused, and Octavia interjected. "But how did you afford that new horse?" And Thorne was off again, talking loudly about his stables and asking about Percy's horses for the hunt.

It was that easy, all night, to prompt him with a single question. Lady Clara seemed to be eavesdropping on their conversation, so Octavia tried to appear engrossed and completely smitten.

She noticed the French ambassador watching her with a furrowed brow. He looked at Guy, then looked at Thorne and raised an eyebrow.

*Oh, dear.* She forgot she was supposed to be Guy's mistress tonight, but she was so busy trying to make Clara jealous that she'd given the wrong impression. She dimpled a smile at the ambassador. She'd have to explain her mistake later somehow.

How could she pretend to flirt with Thorne enough to get the Prouttons' attention but not enough to seem sincerely interested? She feared she had been too successful, because Clara would not meet her eye.

She reluctantly entered the ballroom on Thorne's arm, as he swept her into the first dance. She pasted a smile on her face as she moved through the lively steps and left their dance breathless. Yelverton swooped down on her, complaining loudly, followed by Rushworth.

She sought out Mama and hoped she could rest for a set or two. Octavia caught her breath and surveyed the dancing couples in the long, mirrored ballroom. The high ceilings and dark red curtains made the room feel both intimate and elegant.

The French ambassador joined her before long. "Ah, mademoiselle. We meet again." He extended his hand. "I have so many questions for you."

Octavia knew she had to dance to help Guy. She plastered on a smile, even though she was exhausted, and joined the next set.

The ambassador's questions were mundane, until the dance was nearly over. He tipped his head toward Thorne, who was dancing with a beautiful woman Octavia had never seen. Her long, dark curls framed a delicate, oval face with blue eyes and perfect pink

lips.

It was hard to place her age. She could have been twenty-five or forty-five. She held herself with the confidence of a woman who not only knew she was beautiful, but also knew how to conduct herself in Society.

Octavia felt like a child, barely out of the schoolroom. The ambassador followed her eyes to the woman and Thorne.

“Your new *amour*?” the ambassador asked. He clearly mistook the object of her fascination. She could hardly tear her eyes away from the dark beauty. If only Octavia had that sort of maturity and grace. She wouldn’t make so many mistakes. Guy must think well of a woman like that.

Guy! She was here to help him tonight, not to feel sorry for herself or compare herself to other women.

Octavia leaned in. “No, no, Mr. Thorne is not my *amour*. You enjoy intrigue?”

He smiled and leaned in, too. “Your perfume is intriguing.”

She laughed. “Piver gave it to me to help me with a...rival. She is intent on pursuing the duke, so I must make her believe I prefer her old friend.”

“You are diabolical,” he said, with an approving nod.

Octavia grinned. “And if she is jealous enough, perhaps she will leave the duke alone.”

“Or are you using your Mr. Thorne and his friends to make your duke jealous? Or punish him for a lover’s quarrel?” The French ambassador spun her close in the dance, so they could whisper. “You scheme like Estelle.”

That name again. Before Octavia could ask, the dance drew them apart. The set ended, but her explanation seemed to pacify the ambassador. As long as he still believed Guy had a mistress, he might continue to negotiate with him. She could do her part to avert war between England and France and help Clara and Thorne at the same time.

Before she could congratulate herself much further, the ambassador took her arm to lead her back to Mama. He whispered, “But if you are as brilliant as Estelle, you might be hiding your *real* relationship with the duke from me.” He raised an eyebrow.

Octavia smiled at the ambassador to cover her discomfort as he bowed and slipped away. The man was too perceptive. How would it harm Guy, now that he had discovered the truth? They were not

lovers. They were not even courting.

Surely, her distress was for England, not herself. She sought Guy in the crowded ballroom. He was dancing with the dark-haired beauty she'd noticed with Thorne. Would Octavia have a chance to dance with Guy before the ball ended? She didn't need to save him a dance, if he never claimed it. Why was it that she needed him so much more than he needed her?

Mama rapped her on the arm with her fan. "You look like you're miles away. What is the matter?"

Octavia tried to clear her head. "I haven't danced with Guy yet."

"*His Grace* has obligations," Mama said pointedly.

The duchess eyed Octavia. "I'm sure he remembers you."

Mama laughed. "Octavia has always claimed Woodford for her dance partner. Do you recall when she insisted that he teach her to dance?"

The duchess nodded. "She used to step on his boots and float across the ballroom."

Octavia's throat felt tight. *Not tonight*. Not here.

Mama followed the movements of the dancing couples. "Oh, I loved to watch my little girl dance with him and her brother. She even persuaded her papa to take turns with her when she barely reached his waist."

Tears swam in her eyes. Mama spoke so often of Papa, as if he were still alive.

"And then years later we hired a proper dancing tutor." Mama sighed. "Percy was gone on his Grand Tour, so Spencer and Woodford took turns as her partner."

Her Grace laid a hand on Octavia's arm. "You were always the epitome of grace on the dance floor, whether you were four or fourteen."

Octavia felt a pain in her chest. She couldn't stay here any longer. She couldn't help Guy. She would have to leave the ball without dancing with him.

Which made her chin tremble.

"And Woodford helped her finish her lessons that winter," Mama continued. "I was so grateful to him."

That was too much. The memory of the long, dark months without Spencer or Papa.

"Excuse me," Octavia said, and dipped a curtsy. "I'm tired. I'm going to retire early."

“On your own?” Mama asked.

“I’ll find a footman,” Octavia mumbled. “We live in the same building as the ballroom, even if it’s enormous. I can manage on my own.” She was desperate to leave. She turned and set her sights on a door.

The duchess laid her hand on Octavia’s arm again. “May I accompany you to your room?”

Octavia couldn’t see through the mist of tears. She didn’t trust her voice. She shook her head, curtsied again, and left the ballroom as gracefully as she could without drawing any attention to herself.

She had almost made it halfway along the corridor when a hand on her shoulder stopped her. Octavia screamed.

“Shh!” Guy whispered. “We shouldn’t be out here alone.”

“You scared me half to death,” Octavia said.

“Mother said you were upset.” He ran his hand from her shoulder down to her fingers and enfolded them with his own.

She gulped a breath of air.

Guy brushed the moisture from her cheeks with his other hand. “What’s wrong?”

Octavia looked at him blankly. She had no emotions left to give right now. His touch on her face felt like an echo of happiness, but she couldn’t hear it.

He nodded toward the ballroom. “Did you save me a dance?”

“My apologies.” Octavia was too weary to smile, and Guy didn’t require any pretense. “I’m retiring early.” She dropped his hand and continued along the corridor.

He accompanied her. “What? Without giving me a reason? I’ve been waiting all evening.”

She kept walking.

“You danced with Yelverton,” Guy said. “Please, Octavia.”

She felt the pain building in her chest again and knew she only had moments before another sob erupted.

He tried to catch her eye. “I can’t leave the ball.”

“So, go back,” Octavia said. She tried to decide whether to turn right or left at the next corner.

He took her elbow and guided her around a corner to the right. The pain in her chest expanded, traveling into every dark recess of her soul.

“The French ambassador noticed when I left. I cannot give him

another reason to call for my dismissal.” Guy steered her toward a dimly lit passage. “We must return.”

“You said that you trusted me to cross the embassy alone. If you’ll point me toward the personal apartments or a footman, I’ll be fine.”

His frustration was evident.

“Look, I cannot manage your anger, too,” Octavia said. Her chin trembled. “I have enough to get on with as it is.” She stopped walking and folded her arms.

There was an alcove behind them.

Guy pulled her into the small space hidden behind a gleaming pillar. He dropped his voice below a whisper. “I could see your distress across the room. I did not need Mother to tell me to go after you. What happened?”

Octavia glared at him. “You don’t have time for this. Go back to the ball.”

He growled and clenched his fists. “Octavia. Tell me. Quickly.”

“You are infuriating,” she said. “I just want a good cry, and you scare me out of my wits, and then you bully me.”

He let out a long breath. “I’m sorry.”

They stared at one another. Guy had to return to the ball, and she was holding him back. But her heart still ached, and she lacked the strength or will to face a sea of people.

He rested on the marble plinth, stretched out his legs in the small space, and gestured to her. “Let’s hear it.”

Octavia wasn’t sure where to begin or whether to talk to him or what to do, but she worried that everyone else needed him. She had no right to ask him to stay with her.

Guy leaned back against the smooth marble wall behind him. “Please tell me what’s upsetting you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Fine,” Octavia said. “If you really wish to know.”

“I really wish to know,” he said.

She took a deep breath. “Mama began reminiscing about us dancing together.”

He arched a brow.

“With Spencer.”

His face clouded in grief.

“And how you prepared me for my Season that winter after Spencer died and before Percy returned.” Octavia bit her lip. “Do you remember those formal dance lessons?”

Guy took a crisp square of cloth out of his pocket. "Of course I do. I barely got a new handkerchief, and you're going to ruin this one, too, aren't you?" His exasperated smile was entirely insincere and endearing. His expression softened as his eyes roved over her tear-stained face, and she saw her pain reflected in his eyes.

A glimmer of light broke across the darkness. Octavia took the offered handkerchief and wiped her cheeks. "You remind me so much of him."

"I'm sorry," Guy said. "That must cause you more pain. Is that why you—" He looked to the side, rubbing his hand along the smooth marble of the plinth. "That's why you refused to come to the embassy, isn't it? Because of me?"

Octavia held onto the handkerchief like a lifeline. "I can't run from my grief forever. Being here has helped more than I imagined it ever could. Being with you. You're the only one who remembers Spencer, except Mama."

Guy caught her hand. His gaze seared her. "Do you think of me like a brother? Like Spencer?"

Octavia furrowed her brow. "Not at all." Once again, her awareness shifted. The alcove became intimate, and she realized that she was standing close to the man who mattered most in the world to her.

He left the plinth and closed the distance between them. "But the way you feel about me..."

She shook her head, unable to breathe for a different reason now. He pulled her toward him, and she tucked the handkerchief into his vest pocket, letting her hand linger as she did so.

Guy trapped her hand on his waist. His look was smoldering as he slid her hand around to his back. Slowly, he drew her closer. "I remember that everything changed for me that winter. You weren't a girl anymore. You became a woman." He brushed a curl from her face.

Everything fell into place. That was when Guy began to distance himself from her. After the dancing lessons when they waltzed together.

A woman's high-pitched voice broke the silence. A man's boots struck the floor in regular intervals. Guy put a finger on her lips. The woman spoke rapidly in French, and the man responded.

Octavia's pent-up emotion turned in an instant from sadness to laughter. She tried not to giggle. Guy's eyes begged her to stay

silent. She reached up and removed his finger from her lips, but part of her wanted to run her own finger along his lips.

Footsteps drew closer. They were in the hallway but had not rounded the corner. Octavia knew she was going to giggle at any moment. She couldn't help herself. It was too ridiculous. Hiding in a dark alcove with Guy and crying about Spencer and lessons and two lost years, instead of going to the ball. What if the head of the embassy was discovered here with her?

She pressed her lips together, but the realization that Guy didn't think poorly of her only made everything seem that much funnier. He had pushed her away because he was attracted to her. Happiness bubbled to the surface. The steps stopped right outside their alcove as Octavia's giggle erupted.

Guy dipped his head down and kissed her.



# Chapter 11

Octavia forgot everything except the sensation of his lips on hers. In an instant, the laughter died away, and she only felt his embrace. She craned her neck up to meet his mouth. Light filled the endless depths inside her, and the hurt and pain disappeared.

Guy cupped her cheek with his hand and drew her toward him. Octavia wrapped her arms around his waist and fell into the warmth and strength of his arms. She was still too short. She stepped onto his boots, and he drew her up. Now he was the one fighting a laugh behind the kiss, and she ran her fingers along the back of his neck.

He shuddered and pressed her close, trailing his fingers along the exposed skin of her neck and shoulders. She shivered and pulled away. Her feet landed back on the tile floor.

"Is everything a competition with you?" She gasped for air. "I cannot even run my fingers through your hair. You have to also make me feel—"

Guy smiled wickedly. "Did I win?" His aquamarine eyes twinkled, and his perfectly styled hair was tousled in places now.

Octavia nodded. "I concede." She laid her head on his chest. It was hard to remember anything. The world had shifted entirely, and everything was new.

"Then for your forfeit, I claim my dance with you." Guy drew her out of the alcove.

"I don't think you really won. You only kissed me to keep me quiet." Octavia allowed him to lead her down the hallway. She loved the feel of their intertwined fingers.

They rounded the corner and froze. The French ambassador stood there, waiting, with the dark-haired beauty.

Octavia dropped Guy's hand.

"I thought I heard voices," the woman said. "I was right."

"But they were also silent a long time." The French ambassador grinned at them.

Another voice cut the tension. Someone else approached from the corridor on the left.

"My wife is coming, Estelle." He frowned at Octavia. "Where is your hiding place? We could not find you."

Octavia hesitated. Estelle must be *his* mistress. She couldn't help a man who was unfaithful to his wife.

"Quick!" Estelle urged. "Marguerite cannot see us."

Guy pointed around the corner. "There is a hidden alcove behind the pillar," he said.

"I am obliged," the French ambassador said, and he swept away.

Marguerite came in sight a moment later with a handsome man, several years younger than her. Her eyes lit up when she saw Guy and Octavia. "Oh! You must know the embassy better than I. Is there a private place I might avoid my husband?" She smiled at him.

He pointed the opposite direction. "There is a small chamber down that hallway. The Yellow Room."

Guy tugged Octavia toward the ballroom. "Before we see anyone else or the ball ends."

She giggled. "But it might be more useful to stay out here."

He sighed as they rounded the last corner. "The Prouttons will comment on my absence. Everyone will notice me returning with you. You know what they will say."

Octavia's smile widened. "I do, and I don't mind sullyng my reputation if it helps you negotiate a truce. Do you?"

Guy shook his head as he led her back into the ballroom. "There has to be another way."

"But would you enjoy it as much?"

He marched her past the staring eyes and the whispers and held out his hand as the next dance began. "This is by far the most enjoyable diplomacy I've engaged in all year."



\* \* \*

Guy swept Octavia around the ballroom. He could feel every eye on them. First, she'd fled, and then he'd pursued her. Their long absence had only increased everyone's interest, and now they'd appeared together. If it had been anyone else, he might have hauled

the man out to the balcony and threatened to thrash him.

But instead, he bluffed. It was what he and Octavia both did best. They held their heads up, and Octavia beamed as they twirled around the floor. If there was any way to ensure everyone knew what had just happened, it was her dazzling happiness.

"I'm glad I returned for one last set," Octavia said. "It feels so natural to dance with you."

Guy agreed silently. They'd spent so much time practicing that he instinctively knew how to lead her through every move without thinking. His eyes, however, were scanning the other couples to assess how much damage he'd done to her reputation tonight.

Octavia leaned closer, and her torso brushed against him. "Are you even listening?"

Guy glanced down. "It feels natural to dance with you, too."

She huffed as they spun through another turn. "Repeating my last phrase doesn't mean you were truly listening. You have to pay attention to your dance partner."

He smiled. "Am I neglecting you?" He drew her in as they promenaded past another couple.

"Yes," Octavia said simply. "Stop worrying about everyone else and focus on me."

Guy laughed. She was definitely *not* treating him the way Lady Clara treated Thorne.

"Shall I plaster myself to your side like Pharaoh? Or follow you around like one of those puppies?" He nodded his head toward Yelverton, who was dancing with Lady Clara.

Octavia straightened. She was still head and shoulders shorter than he was. "You might at least walk me to my room when the ball is finished."

"I wouldn't mind saying good night to you," Guy said in a low, husky voice. He really shouldn't, but he couldn't help himself.

A smile split her face. "Much better," she said.

The dance ended, and Guy led Octavia to her mother. He'd never seen Lady Shelford glare at him that way. Well, until recently.

In all fairness, he had ignored her warnings and pleas and pursued Octavia without a hint of hesitation.

"You must have received a burst of energy," Lady Shelford said, with a hint of reproach in her voice. "Suddenly you're not tired at all."

"I'm so glad you returned to the ball," Guy's mother said.

Lady Shelford put her fan up to shield their conversation. "Did I not ask you two to be discreet?"

"Honestly, Mama, do you think we plan any of this?" Octavia whispered back.

"Any of what?" Lady Shelford asked, with a stern look.

Octavia pressed her lips shut.

Guy searched the room for an escape. "I need to speak with the musicians and thank them for a fine evening." He bowed and strode across the room.

*What had he gotten himself into?* His mind began racing, but there was no time to think. French diplomats, lower members of the government, and guests all pressed in on him. Everyone congratulated him on a successful evening. It took half an hour to cross the room. The musicians were gone by then.

The staff were hovering, trying to be invisible, waiting for his signal to clear the room and begin to take down the decorations. He shook his head. There were still too many guests lingering. The candles would be nothing but stubs by the end of the night.

The French ambassador accosted him. "Excellent affair." He winked at his own pun. "Pull up a chair."

Guy sat along the wall, where he could see Octavia shifting restlessly from one leg to another while Yelverton spoke with her.

"Now, let us discuss when we can have a discussion." Again, the ambassador laughed at his own wordplay.

Guy chuckled for diplomacy's sake and listened to a lengthy explanation of the ambassador's schedule, from the way he took his breakfast each morning, to the length of his bedtime routine at night. Octavia watched him reproachfully from her corner of the ballroom.

At last, they settled on a time when they could negotiate whether their countries would enter into peace negotiations.

Guy contemplated the empty room. The French ambassador smiled. "And we have talked long enough that my wife has left without me. I shall have to go home another way. If she should ask you, perhaps we spoke an hour or two longer?"

Guy nodded, and the ambassador shook his hand vigorously. "I knew you would understand me."

Guy examined the deserted room. He motioned to the staff, and they began to sweep the debris from the floor. One by one they extinguished candles. The platters of food and bowls of lemonade

disappeared.

Octavia must have walked back to her rooms with Yelverton or her mother. She'd understand why he had stayed.

No, she wouldn't. He'd have to apologize tomorrow. Guy rubbed a hand over his face. *Tonight*. He'd go tonight and see if she was still awake. Otherwise, her adorable chin would be wobbling again.

He loved her tender heart. It was one of her most endearing, and annoying, qualities. She was as fragile as one of his mother's china dolls.

Guy strode down the corridors toward Octavia's room. Once, as a boy, he'd been fascinated by Mother's beautiful, expensive, collectible French dolls. He had reached up on the shelf to stroke the soft, silky hair, only to have the doll teeter and crash to the floor. The face had smashed into pieces, and he had blamed the accident on one of their dogs.

He still felt ashamed of the lie. He should buy Mother a new doll for her collection, if any of the merchants would allow him to enter their shops. He'd send a French assistant to make the purchase for him.

Guy reached the hallway of the personal apartments and found Lady Shelford pacing back and forth, like a guardian dragon in front of her cave of treasure.

"Good evening," Guy said.

"Keep walking," Lady Shelford said.

It appeared that nearly three decades of friendship was coming to an end. "May I speak with you in the morning?"

Lady Shelford refused to leave her post. "Go to bed, Woodford."

Guy searched desperately for some resolution. "May I court your daughter?"

She stopped pacing. "This isn't the place to discuss it." She led him to his mother's room and knocked.

"Come in," a soft voice called.

"I told you he would come," Lady Shelford announced as she threw open the door. She glided into Mother's sitting room and waited expectantly.

"And I told you he'd try to talk his way out of it," Mother said.

Guy looked at his mother guiltily. Why did he feel like a boy again? He was the Duke of Woodford, head of the British embassy of Paris, an emissary of the queen.

"Sit," Mother said, and Guy sat.

Her voice was soft and quiet, as always. "You have an unerring knack, Arabella."

They smiled at each other.

It had been a long day. It was late. He did not want to gossip with them all night, but what choice did he have?

"Guy has just asked my permission to court Octavia," Lady Shelford said.

"In the corridors? Anyone might hear," Mother said.

Lady Shelford settled on the sofa like a queen. Octavia had learned so many of her mannerisms from her mother. "Exactly," Lady Shelford said. "We require the privacy of your sitting room."

"Son, what are you thinking?" His mother rearranged her gown, and both women stared at him.

He was rapidly losing control of the situation, and he tried to regain it. "I wish to court Octavia."

"At two o'clock in the morning?" Mother's mouth twitched.

"I told you he wouldn't last a week," Lady Shelford said.

Guy glanced between them. "This is a terrible idea."

"It is tonight," she agreed. "Not always perhaps, but right now."

"You're rushing into this," his mother added. "You usually take months to study the woman's character before you make any hint of interest."

Guy ran a hand through his hair. "You're right. I'm sorry." He couldn't forget the image of Octavia in his arms or the way she looked at him. "But I believe she feels the same way toward me."

Lady Shelford and his mother laughed.

Guy straightened in his chair. "It's not unreasonable for me to hope."

The amusement on their faces only pushed him further. Guy left his chair and put his hands behind his back. "Are you refusing your permission?" It was unthinkable for anyone to deny a duke, despite what he had said to Thorne. And she had always been like a second mother to him.

Lady Shelford waved her hand. "Sit. I'm merely advising you to think before you jump in with both lips."

"Oh, it's too late for that," Mother said.

Lady Shelford raised an eyebrow. "What *were* your intentions, seeking out my daughter's bedroom door?"

Guy did not sit. He fought his rising temper and embarrassment. "Merely to wish Octavia a good evening." And because he'd

promised her that he would.

“Is there a particular reason you felt an urgency to ask my permission *tonight*?” Lady Shelford’s intense eyes reminded him of Octavia.

Guy put a hand on the doorknob. “Nothing in particular.”

She narrowed her gaze. “In all the years that I’ve known you, Woodford, have you ever lied to me before?”

He hesitated. “That was the first time, Lady Shelford.” He ducked out of the room and closed the door without waiting to hear her answer.

Guy crossed the hall to his own room and quickly entered his chambers. His valet helped him change without a word. Guy settled into his favorite chair and put his feet up on an ottoman.

He sank his head into his hands. Too many people and too many emotions. *Octavia*. Her mother, refusing his request for a courtship. His own mother, urging caution when Guy had already waited years. Lady Clara, still being forced on him by her parents. Yelverton, his completely useless undersecretary. How would he ever train him? Thorne. How could he help him? The French ambassador. Should he really have helped him evade his wife? Estelle, quizzing him about Octavia during their dance.

What he wouldn’t give for a bracing swim or a brisk run with Pharaoh by his side, if only Pharaoh could run right now.

A knock sounded at the door. Guy groaned. No matter who it was, it couldn’t be good. He cracked the door.

Thorne stood on the other side. “Do you have a moment to talk? Yelverton is snoring like a baby, but I thought you’d be awake.”

Guy opened the door wide. Sleep would not come easily tonight anyway. “Come in. Did you make any progress with Lady Clara or her parents tonight? Tell me everything.”

# Chapter 12

Octavia successfully avoided Guy all day. It wasn't hard. He was always working.

She took a breakfast tray in her room. She skipped afternoon tea. She read all day. It was heavenly not to have to make idle conversation.

For once, Mama did not chide her or prod her. She had an excuse for staying alone, and Mama agreed with her. She and Guy needed some distance.

He did not deserve her. He could not kiss her one moment, then ignore her the next. He had distinctly promised to walk her to her room. Instead, he'd made an excuse about talking to musicians, and practically fled after their dance. He'd talked to everyone else. She had waited as long as she could, but finally left when it was clear he was drawing out his conversation with the French ambassador on purpose to avoid accompanying her.

*Fine.* If he wanted to evade her, she would accommodate him. She would convince Mama to return to England as soon as it was safe. They could still make it home in time for Easter.

Octavia twisted to see the back of her dinner dress in the mirror. She examined the intricate braids her maid had worked so carefully to create. "Will the curls in front hold?"

"They always do," her maid answered.

Octavia considered her reflection. Mama would be disappointed if Octavia didn't look stunning, and she would be disappointed if Octavia was late. Better to be on time. "Thank you. That will do."

The maid left, and Octavia willed herself to follow. She didn't want to leave the room and face everyone. She had had her fill of mortification and humiliation the last few days. How could she bear Lady Prouton's triumphant looks when Guy ignored her tonight?

Anger flared. How dare he treat her this way? She genuinely cared for him and had thought he cared for her. To go between such highs and lows the last few days was exhausting.

Mama's sharp knock sounded on the door. "Hurry, or we'll be late."



Octavia suffocated her emotions, as she had during her Season last year. She knew how to be numb, but it was harder than usual today.

Mama smiled approvingly at her ensemble. "You outdid yourself tonight."

Octavia followed her mechanically through the corridors toward the imposing dining room. Her eyes sought Yelverton. He was safe on nights like tonight. He didn't require any effort. He would be kind and carry the conversation. She only need smile and encourage him.

But Yelverton was standing next to Guy to greet the guests tonight. She found her assigned seat and waited for a footman to pull out the chair. She was grateful it wasn't a small dinner, where she might have had to pair up with someone or wait to walk into dinner on someone's arm. Here, in the anonymity of an enormous dining hall, she could quietly take her place.

The chairs filled in around her, but no one seated themselves beside her. The din of conversation grew louder. Octavia threw a surreptitious glance at Guy. His tall frame towered over most men. Even Thorne and Yelverton were shorter by several inches.

For years, Guy had been her ideal of manhood. No one could equal him, as self-important and overbearing as he could be. He was also gentle and loving, and yesterday had been like a dream.

As if he felt her eyes on him, Guy locked eyes with her and winked. Octavia quickly stared straight ahead at the strangers across the table from her. They smiled politely and returned to their conversation.

Octavia searched the length of the table and noticed that the duchess had seated Clara next to Thorne tonight. Guy must have said something to her.

She couldn't help darting one more glance at Guy, and this time his gaze snapped to hers immediately. He was troubled. Or angry with her again?

A balding man, older than Papa would have been, seated himself on her right. His great white mustache drooped to his chin. Octavia had skipped the formal introductions this evening. Perhaps that was why Guy was scowling at her. Not scowling. Glowering. No. Brooding. He was brooding tonight. What was on his mind?

The man cleared his throat, and Octavia startled. She'd been watching Guy yet again. The stranger's amused twinkle set her at

ease. "And who is my charming dinner partner this evening? I know I should wait for you to introduce yourself, but..."

He was probably in his fifties.

"Lady Octavia Shelford. And you are?"

"Sir John Gardner Wilkinson."

Octavia gasped and clutched at her heart.

Sir John chuckled. "I must say, I rarely get that kind of response." He raised his voice. "Did you see that?"

The woman across the table smiled at them.

"My wife, Lady Caroline Wilkinson." Sir John waved his hand toward her.

"Are you on your way to Egypt or returning?"

A chair scraped on Octavia's other side. "Don't start without me."

She stiffened. Guy had seated himself on her left side. Why hadn't she thought to read the name cards on the table? She would have had a warning.

Sir John acknowledged Guy and answered her. "Returning."

"Are you preparing material for another book? More myths and history?" Octavia asked. Guy listened at her side, but she pursued the conversation as if he were not there.

"Ah, no." Sir John's eyes lit up. "A guide for travelers. The best boat routes from England or France. The different boat lines on the Nile. Accommodations and how to view the sites."

Octavia edged forward, so she would not constantly see Guy's profile in the edge of her vision. "Have you spent the entire winter there?"

Guy drew his chair closer to her, and the scent of his cologne wafted across her.

"And more," Sir John said. "Are you considering a tour?"

"I'm on Grand Tour right now," Octavia said. "I wonder if I could persuade Mama to go to Egypt."

Guy shifted in his seat.

"Fall and winter are the best seasons," Sir John said. "The warm climate is milder then. I suggest arriving in October. November at the latest. It requires at least three months to see the country properly. How long will you be in France?"

Octavia picked up a napkin. "I hardly know. I should leave this instant, if I could get safe passage."

Guy stirred beside her.

"But tell me your complete itinerary, if I were to leave Paris for Egypt tomorrow."

She ignored Guy for the entire dinner. Sir John was willing to talk at length about selecting steamer ships, which items to purchase in England before leaving for Egypt, how to avoid lice and fleas, which hotels were best in each city, and many other practical tips.

If only she hadn't intended on leaving for England, she would have been persuaded to spend the next winter in Egypt. Perhaps she could return home, then go to Egypt anyway. Maybe Percy and Eleanor would go with her.

"You can continue corresponding with your friends. The English Post Office, of course, is at the consulate," Sir John finished. "Do you speak much with your British counterpart in Egypt?"

Sir John addressed the question to Guy, who had been neglecting Lady Clara on his other side to eavesdrop on their conversation. Mr. Thorne didn't seem to mind having Clara to himself.

"Yes, we correspond regularly. France has a vested interest in the region, so there is a great deal to discuss."

"Oh, it's a hotbed," Sir John agreed. "Especially in the summer." He chuckled. "There is a wind that blows for fifty days without ceasing. Much the way I talk without stopping."

Octavia had read his histories of Egypt over and over, after Guy had introduced her to them. "Oh, no, Sir John. I could listen to you all evening."

"If you should ever decide to go, please send word. Use my name at Shepherd's Hotel, and you'll receive the best service."

She smiled at him. "Certainly."

Sir John pulled her chair back and bowed, then left to escort his wife. Octavia searched the room for her mother.

"Can I escort you back to your room tonight?" Guy's low voice startled her. He offered his elbow to her.

Octavia turned her shoulder. *Drat*. Mama had already left with the duchess. Sir John watched her curiously.

"Thank you." She smiled stiffly at Guy and slipped her arm through his, maintaining as much distance as possible.

"Don't you need to stay and talk to everyone like you did last night?" Octavia whispered.

"You talked to Sir John until nearly everyone had left," Guy

responded as he led her out of the empty dining room.

Octavia set her jaw.

Guy held her firmly by his side. "I'm sorry I couldn't escort you last night. I could not leave."

"The musicians did." Octavia raised her chin. "That was an excuse."

Guy drew her close. "I tried to say goodnight, but your mother intervened at your door."

Octavia whipped her head around. Mama hadn't mentioned anything about that.

"And gave me a scolding at two o'clock in the morning." His eyes were fixed on the end of the corridor. "She loves me like a son. A wayward son."

Octavia sniffed. "No doubt you deserved whatever reprimand she gave you."

Guy turned her toward him. "I asked if I could court you."

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

He shook his head. "I do my best thinking at night. Does it really matter what time it was?"

"You want to court me?" Octavia relaxed into him and allowed herself to stroll more naturally by his side.

Guy muttered.

"As much as crocodiles want tourists to fall into the Nile? Did you actually just say that?" She drew herself close to him. "Because that is a definite, *desperate* 'Yes.' You realize that?" Octavia put her hand on his chest and gazed at him. "You must be absolutely crazy for me."

"Or absolutely crazy," he said.

Octavia pushed off his chest. "That was far less romantic."

Guy looked both ways in the corridor. "Really, though, we should slow things down."

Octavia stopped in front of the door to her chambers. "We? I am fine. I did not see you all day, and I had a delightful time anyway."

He slipped an arm around her waist. "I thought of you all day. I had to resort to using Yelverton to get some work done."

Her heart pounded. Guy inched closer to her, backing her into the doorframe of her room. He moved into the space, where no one would see them in the hallway.

"May I bid you goodnight now instead?" He ran his fingers up her arm and around her shoulders. His dinner gloves trailed across

the bare skin of her shoulders and up her neck. There were some advantages to falling in love with an older man, and kissing a man with experience was one of them.

The heat had returned to his eyes, and Guy bent over her. "Your new perfume has been tempting me all evening."

"This might speed things up," Octavia said breathlessly, "not slow them down."

Guy brushed a feather-light kiss on her lips. "I hate it when you're right." He drew her into an embrace. His head rested on top of hers, and she fit easily into his side. "But you look especially beautiful tonight, and I wanted to apologize for last night. That's why I seated you by Sir John."

"Thank you for that. Truly. But good night, Guy," she said, pulling herself away.

"Already?"

"Unless you want a repeat demonstration of my self-defense lessons..." Octavia wrapped her tiny hand around one of his thick, muscled wrists.

Guy slid his hand around to caress hers, and Octavia dropped his immediately. "You have *too* much experience with women," she said. "You need to settle down and marry, old man."

"Do I?" He lounged against the doorjamb. "Any recommendations for the bride?"

"Lady Clara?" Octavia said, and she slipped inside her chambers. Her heart beat wildly. She could not end the evening like that, even if she loved to get a reaction from him. She opened the door again to find Guy still standing there, stunned.

"You never wished me goodnight," she said.

Guy grinned instantly as he leaned forward. "Come back out, and I'll do it properly."

Octavia hesitated in the doorway. "Do you truly intend to slow things down? Because if you do, I shouldn't tease you like that anymore, and I shouldn't be kissing you goodnight."

Guy started forward, then stopped. He searched her face, as if uncertain. "Maybe I should, and maybe I shouldn't. I'm not sure why you are in such a hurry to return to England. Are *you* trying to slow things down? Because leaving will do that."

Octavia couldn't meet his eyes. How could she explain how hurt she felt last night? And all day, when he never sought her out? "Why did *you* say you'd be absolutely crazy to want to court me?"

That sounds like stopping, not just slowing down.” That still hurt, even if she was used to the way he teased her.

“That one’s easy. Your mother won’t grant me permission to so much as look at you, you’re still encouraging Yelverton, and you told Sir John that you’d leave Paris in a heartbeat if you could...” Guy’s agonized voice penetrated her haze. “You’re flirting with Thorne and telling me to marry Lady Clara. Now you don’t want me to kiss you goodnight. I don’t know which end is up, Octavia, and which end is down.”

Her eyes drifted up of their own account, and Guy held her gaze. “It sounds like *you* intend to stop everything completely. Say the word, and I’ll never approach you again. I’ll take you back to England myself, if you’re so desperate to be rid of me and any unhappy memories I create.”

Octavia shook her head. “No, Guy.” How could he misunderstand her so completely? And yet, her actions, through his eyes, sounded so different.

Before she could figure out what to say, he pushed off the doorframe, pain etched in every line of his face. “Goodnight, Octavia.”

She closed her door and sank onto her bed. Waves of heaviness dragged her down. Now that he was gone, her brain slowly ground back into action. She knew exactly what she should have said. Why did she think of things too late?

She wished she had told Guy that he was exactly what she needed right now. She wanted to run across the hallway, pound on his door, and beg him to hold her until the darkness disappeared again.

But Mama expected her to act one way, and Guy expected her to act another, and she wanted to help Clara and Thorne, and how could she break Yelverton’s heart a second time, and everything hurt when she tried to think. It was all too much, too much, too much.

She struggled out of her dress with the maid’s help, and sank into a fitful, shadowy sleep in which she tried to reach the tree on the shore but kept drowning in the Seine.

# Chapter 13

The river's freezing water cut like shards of glass. Guy needed to feel the piercing pain this morning. It didn't help.

He hadn't found any answers last night after he left Octavia. He struggled against the current, fighting for clarity.

Everything was too complicated with her. He pushed against the water. It always had been. Perhaps it always would be.

His shoulders screamed, but he kept swimming. Why did he still care? Why did he still try? Why hadn't he let go of his ridiculous infatuation years ago?

Guy turned around and let the Seine push him back toward the bank. He raced until his legs couldn't burn any more.

The idea of Octavia had haunted his other courtships, and he'd never been able to pursue another woman with his whole heart, not while he indulged these dreams. It was time to let go and let the river wash it away.

He emerged by the same elm where he always finished his swim. His legs shook, and the crisp morning air bit at his limbs.

Octavia waited beneath the elm with a wide grin on her face. Her eyes took in his dripping torso and the swimming suit. "I usually sleep in, but I made an exception today. I dreamt of the river all night."

Guy grabbed his shirt and tugged it over his head. "Are we slowing down, Octavia?" he called. "Or stopping? What is this?"

She grinned at him as her eyes took in his appearance, and once again Guy felt that tug of war inside himself. He had just decided to give her up completely. Forever.

And here she was, grinning at him.

"What would Lady Prouton say?" he yelled as he scrambled to tug on his trousers. "She'd be scandalized."

Octavia left the elm and climbed down to the riverbank. "Nonsense. I invited Lady Clara and the boys."

Guy sputtered. "The boys?"

"Wouldn't you rather row today? The boys are on their way."

Guy rubbed the towel on his legs, and Octavia watched him.

"It's entirely improper for you to be here, staring at my legs," he said.

Octavia shrugged. "I had to see you first thing this morning."

Guy stopped with his towel halfway around one leg. "Why?"

"I already told you that I didn't sleep well," Octavia said, and the bravado left her face. "I wanted you to be clear about how I felt."

"So, you came to watch me swim."

Octavia grinned. "It was worth waking up early."

Guy shook his head. His head was spinning. Was this the same Octavia as the one he'd spoken to last night? The one who wouldn't let him kiss her goodnight? The one who wanted to slow down or stop their relationship entirely?

"You missed a spot. Shall I get it?" Octavia asked, with a smirk on her face.

"No!" he said loudly, and a crew of oarsmen looked over. It was Yelverton, Thorne, and Rushworth.

"You were serious." Guy tossed the towel back on his mackintosh square. "They're here to row. How did you get them out of bed before noon?"

"The servants knocked on their doors and informed them that they were needed," Octavia said. "And I invited Lady Clara. I like your hair like that."

Guy looked around. Sure enough, Lady Clara stood to one side, several feet away, her eyes delicately averted. He approached Octavia, so he could speak privately with her.

"You didn't need to rush down here," Guy said. "I'm not angry with you. Just confused."

Octavia bit her lip. "But you get angry when you don't understand things." She reached a hand toward him, and he took it. "I didn't want you to give up on me, because I don't express my feelings well."

Yelverton was watching them. Guy hated having an audience. "You really think I would give up that easily."

Her face was deadly serious. "Tell me that I'm wrong."

Guy huffed out a sigh. She knew him too well. He let go of her fingers and scrubbed his hand over his face. He was upset that he couldn't make out her feelings, if he was honest with himself, and that probably wasn't fair to her. He didn't like the accurate view of himself that she had shown him.



"You haven't rowed with a crew for years," Octavia said in a falsely bright voice. "The boys are waiting."

Guy shrugged out of his clothes until he was in his bathing suit again. He moved along the bank toward the boat. "You sound like my mother."

"Thank you." Octavia smiled and settled on a rock to watch him. "Clara, the view is much better over here."

Lady Clara picked her way down the grassy embankment toward the stony outcropping. "It's practically on top of the river."

"Precisely." Octavia exhaled a long breath. "We can see everything."

But again, he couldn't tell whether she was serious, or if she was simply trying to smooth things over because he'd let her see such an ugly part of himself.

Guy helped the others push the long scull into the river. They were three years younger, so he'd only rowed with them for one year at Cambridge. Loughton had captained the boat then, not him, so he tried to recall which of them would make the best coxswain.

"Thorne. You call the count."

Octavia had arranged this entirely to impress Lady Clara, after all. Guy knew how to adapt to any crew, and they fell into an easy rhythm. His shoulders strained at the use of the double oars, and the crisp morning breeze cut across him.

The fire in his arms grew to an inferno, and his legs tensed with every stroke, but Octavia was trying to help him, and he couldn't let her down. It wasn't her fault he had swum so idiotically far this morning.

It wasn't her fault that he was an idiot in matters of the heart.

They rowed far past the outcropping of rock and returned against the flow of the river. Fishermen and other boats were beginning to crowd the quiet water.

He knew they were close to shore when he heard Octavia's voice cheering him on. She had always been his most eager ally and his loudest critic.

A chorus of children's voices joined hers. He focused on Thorne's count until the boat hit the sandy riverbank. He looked toward the outcropping of rock and found several young children sitting cross-legged at Octavia's feet.

Lady Clara and Octavia clapped for the men as they heaved the boat onto the shore.

“Bravo!” Octavia called. “It’s like our very own boat race.”

“Do you still row on the canals by your estate, Reggie?” Lady Clara asked.

Thorne paused, and his end of the boat dipped precariously. He picked it back up, and the four men continued toward the small boathouse by the outcropping of rock.

“Every summer. The merchant ships hate it.” He hoisted the scull onto his shoulder as they passed the women, and Guy and Rushworth lifted their end to match the action. Yelverton scrambled to help Thorne at the front.

The men carried the scull into a cramped wooden shed. They dried the boat, but Guy could see that Thorne was eager to return outside.

“Go ahead,” Guy said to the others. “I’ll finish cleaning the scull.”

“I’ll help,” Yelverton said.

Rushworth and Thorne exchanged an ominous glance and left them alone.

Guy rested his arms on the upside-down boat. “Thanks for the row. We should do this more often.”

Yelverton met his eye with something like defiance. “I can be useful to you in other ways, too, if you’ll let me.”

Guy straightened and began replacing the oars on the wall. “You have been.”

Yelverton came over to help. “You’re not giving me any tasks.”

“You don’t get out of bed before most of the meetings are over.”

“You don’t assign me to attend the meetings.”

“You don’t ask me if you can come.” Guy reached for the last oar, and Yelverton snatched it out of his hands. He slammed it on the wall.

“Give me some real work to do!” Yelverton’s voice reverberated through the shed.

Guy surveyed the shed. Everything was in order. He crossed the small space. Yelverton pounded his fist on the boat. “Don’t walk away from me, Woodford.”

Guy turned toward him. “Why did you come to Paris, really? I won’t mince words with you. You’ve been lazy and incompetent ever since you arrived. You haven’t given me a reason to trust you with anything of significance.”

The air in the shed was charged. Guy waited for Yelverton to lie

or make an excuse. He expected him to avoid responsibility, as he always did, or back down.

Yelverton met his gaze. "I knew Lady Octavia was traveling here, and I intended to propose a second time. She nearly changed her mind in London, and I thought I might persuade her here, away from the others. I hadn't realized how she felt about you, though."

Guy nodded. Finally, the truth, as Yelverton saw it. "And you thought you'd take a vacation at the queen's expense until she arrived? That being an undersecretary or a deputy ambassador was a lark?"

Yelverton's mouth tightened. "I'm not proud of it."

Guy advanced on him. He pointed toward the door. "Is that why you won't commit when I ask how long you're staying? You really expect me to invest time training you, then have you leave as soon as you can convince Octavia to marry you? She's right out there. Why haven't you proposed again?"

Yelverton's face was grim. "She won't have me now, as you know full well, and she wouldn't before, so give me something to do."

Guy didn't know that for certain, but he suspected Yelverton was right. "Why not return to England? I won't waste time with anyone who's not serious about their service to the Foreign Office or the Crown."

Yelverton crossed the boathouse to join him. "I'm serious now, whether or not I was before. Do you have any idea what it's like to see her looking at you like that?" He pounded the wall. "Every time. Three Seasons. Three proposals. Three rejections."

Guy put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry about Octavia. Are you truly heart-broken?"

Yelverton shrugged the hand off. "Lady Agatha. Lady Diana. Lady Octavia. It stings every time."

Guy tugged open the door of the boathouse.

"What am I doing wrong?" Yelverton asked quietly as they climbed down the grassy slope toward the rocks.

Guy peered at him intently. "Thorne and Rushworth spoke harshly the other night. I don't know if there's any truth in their criticism."

Yelverton grimaced. "There may well be some truth to it. I did propose too quickly. Every time." He hit a fist against his thigh.

Guy followed him up the embankment. "Don't be too hard on

yourself. I haven't figured out how to get married, either."

Estelle had joined the group. She waved as if they were old friends, and he wasn't sure it was wise to be seen on the banks of the Seine with his counterpart's mistress.

But she and Octavia were deep in conversation. While Lady Clara chatted amiably with Thorne, Octavia was actively avoiding his gaze.

"I need to return," Guy said. "Good morning to you all." He bowed and prepared to walk back to the embassy.

"But you must try the new *carte de visite*!" Estelle said. "They have costumes, for people who like Egypt. He likes Egypt?"

"Reads about it every night before bed, so he can dream exotic dreams." Octavia grinned at him. He'd never said that. Maybe once, when she was a child.

"What's this?" Yelverton asked.

"Nonsense," Guy muttered under his breath. Sir John's book was on his bedside table, but they didn't need to know that.

Octavia stood. "Disdéri's studio. Francis Firth even had his photo taken there, and you know how spectacular his photos of Egypt are."

"Ah," Guy called over to them. "We are British. He will not allow us to enter the studio." He needed an update on the Italian Separatist movement, and he needed to read the asylum law line by line before he met with the French ambassador.

Estelle waved her hand and called back. "Tell him Estelle sent you for photos of Octavia. He will want pictures of *her*."

Yelverton approached Guy. "We should go. It's a good diplomatic opportunity."

"The morning is late enough," Guy said. "It's play. You can go, but I have deadlines."

"It's barely eight-thirty." Yelverton spoke quietly. "If you don't go, you'll offend her."

Guy folded his mackintosh square slowly, then gave Yelverton a withering look. "You've never talked back to me before."

Yelverton straightened. "I should have. You've been wrong often enough before."

Guy glared at him. He'd finally grown a backbone, but now he was an insolent puppy instead of a spineless one. Someone needed to take him in hand, and there was no one else to do it but him.

Guy folded his arms. "Give me one good reason to waste an hour

taking pictures instead of reviewing the asylum law.”

“Because the ambassador’s mistress has more power over the French government than you or I do, and because Lady Octavia wants to go. There are two good reasons.”

Guy nodded to Yelverton. “Join me.” He approached Estelle. “Mademoiselle, I am intrigued. Will you leave the details with Mr. Thorne and Mr. Rushworth? Tell them the time and the place, and they will arrange a time in the schedule. Thank you. Right now, so many of your shop owners will not countenance a British patron. What a rare privilege.” He bowed over her hand.

Octavia’s attention had been diverted by one of the children, so he could not catch her eye to bid her farewell. Or was she avoiding him? She had caught him in an uncomfortable truth, and he still didn’t want to tell her that he had sworn to give her up right before she arrived, rather than try to understand her.

“I want a *carte de visite* for myself! Promise me,” Estelle trilled. The children ran around her skirts. The youngest girl also had dark curls. Was the father who he thought it was?

Guy and Yelverton bowed again and headed toward the embassy. Rushworth and Thorne would have to escort Octavia and Lady Clara.

“If I’m going to take time out of the day for this, you’ll need to read the update on the Separatist movement instead of me,” Guy said.

“I will,” Yelverton said defiantly.

Guy increased his pace. Yelverton matched his speed. Guy slowed his steps. Yelverton matched his pace again.

“I’ve figured out one of the reasons you’re not married yet,” Guy said. “Be yourself. Don’t try to be me. If I’m going to keep you here—which I haven’t decided yet—it will be for your own skills, not for mimicking my own.”

The embassy came into sight. Yelverton scowled at the building. “I’ve figured out one of the reasons *you’re* not married yet.”

Guy arched an eyebrow.

“You’re scared of feeling deep emotions. You won’t let yourself wallow in love, like I do. We’re going to be good for each other.”

Guy shook his head and mumbled something.

“I won’t be the death of you,” Yelverton said. “I’m your new best mate.”

Guy groaned.

“And I’m here to stay.”

# Chapter 14

Octavia dove right into the attack. "All right, Rushworth, tell me about Isabella."

He startled and missed a step as they ambled along the tree-lined boulevard toward the embassy. "There's nothing to tell. You are friends with her?"

"Who isn't?" Octavia ducked below a low-hanging branch that swung over the sidewalk.

Rushworth held the maple leaves out of her way, then waited for Clara, who walked on Thorne's arm behind them.

"Have you seen her son? How is she faring as a landowner?" Octavia side-stepped a puddle.

"He's a handsome spitfire, like his mother." Rushworth stepped into the water and continued without noticing. Despite his protestations, he was completely distracted himself. "She's ordering everyone about and has everything firmly under control, or so she says."

Octavia grinned to herself. Once she returned to England, she'd have to see about helping Isabella and Rushworth. "I'm certain her life is in chaos. It always is, but she hides it well. You know Bella."

Rushworth furrowed his brow. His shoes sloshed with water the rest of the way. He left her at the doors of the embassy, and she turned to Clara. "We need to talk."

Clara eyed the hallway leading to the breakfast room.

"Privately," Octavia said. She marched past the grand entrance and through a door that led to the stables. Pharaoh barked a welcome.

Clara shrank back. "Dogs?"

"I'm sorry. It's the only place we can speak without being overheard. Pharaoh is a sweetheart, truly." Octavia positioned herself between Clara and the Great Dane before letting the eager dog out of her kennel. Pharaoh wandered over to a patch of grass beside the stables.

"See? She isn't interested in you at all."

"Just like the duke." Clara laughed.

Octavia linked arms with Clara and strolled along the edge of the grassy knoll.

Clara turned her head. "I'm sorry. Mama has been absolutely horrid about matchmaking, and I am at my wits' end. All she does is talk about His Grace and why I can't catch his eye."

"Why don't you return to England?" Octavia asked. "You seem unhappy here."

Clara stepped out of Pharaoh's way as the dog panted her way toward Octavia. "My parents refuse to leave. They insist that three Seasons is enough, and they are ashamed to sponsor another, even if the duke doesn't notice me."

Octavia laid a hand on her friend's arm. "I am afraid of that, too. Already, one Season has come and gone. My dear Mama married in her first Season, and I did not. Now, the next Season is starting in a few weeks, and I dread it."

"It's only your second. It would be my *fourth*. My parents would rather hide me in Europe than face that embarrassment."

"But why haven't you married?" Octavia asked. She was working her way toward her goal. "I've seen men admire you."

"My parents insist on a title," Clara said simply. "I insist on a man of sense who is not aged or infirm. We have yet to find a man like that who is also interested in me."

"I wouldn't mind an untitled gentleman," Octavia said. "My brother has an heir, so there is no need for me to concern myself. A man like Rushworth or Thorne..."

Clara slowed her step. So, she wasn't indifferent. That was what Octavia needed to know. Clara glanced sideways. "But you do seem to have your eye set on the highest title."

"Guy isn't a title," Octavia said. "He's my oldest and dearest friend. We've argued comfortably for years."

Clara stepped out of Pharaoh's way again. "Do you have your eye set on him?"

"Of course," Octavia said. "How can I keep my eyes off him, as attractive as he is? Only Thorne could compete. Every woman in London is in love with Thorne, except you and me, and I'm halfway in love with him anyway." She laughed.

Clara shifted uncomfortably. "He and Woodford do look remarkably alike. Not their features or personalities, but they are both tall with blond hair and blue eyes."

Octavia scratched Pharaoh behind the ears. "They are



ridiculously handsome, aren't they? Guy is a bit taller. Perhaps a bit broader through the shoulders."

Clara backed away from the over-sized animal. "But Reggie's eyes are a shade lighter, I'd say. Nearly grey, and his hair is so pale. It's not so carefully styled as the duke's. Have you noticed? It's always a bit tousled." She smiled.

"Mm-hmm," Octavia murmured. She pointed to the far end of the green, and Pharaoh left them, barely able to walk anymore. "Can't be long before she has the pups. Might be her last chance for some exercise."

Clara didn't even flinch at the mention of puppies. She seemed completely lost in thought. "Reggie is a dear. For someone else, of course, not for me. I would never..."

Octavia hid a smile. "Of course, but you wouldn't mind if someone else did? Being such an old family friend, I wouldn't want to encroach if you had a special relationship with him."

Clara stared at her, perplexed. "But you and Woodford..."

"We haven't been getting along recently, and I wondered why Thorne hasn't married yet. Like you said, they look so much alike, and he treats me so well. If I did change my mind, would it upset you? I would never dream of it, if you already have an interest there."

Clara's brow was knit. "We've never...No. He's just an old friend. Goodness." She twisted her hands together.

Pharaoh came slowly wandering back up the green, and Octavia led the Great Dane back toward her kennel. "What a relief. Thank you. Thorne's an absolute sweetheart, and I might enjoy getting to know him better." She slipped her arm through Clara's. "We had best prepare for the photos. I only wanted a moment to be alone with a friend. One is never alone in the embassy."



\* \* \*

Disdéri admitted them into his studio with disdain. "Estelle? Only for her. So, *this* is Octavia. Yes, we shall do a profile picture of you. And which of you is the ambassador? A picture of the two of you

together?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Octavia said.

“It is.” Disdéri said flatly. He sized up the others. “We shall begin with a group photo.”

Disdéri seated Clara and Octavia in front. He arranged Rushworth and Yelverton on the sides and put Thorne and Guy in the center.

Octavia held her breath, hoping that Estelle’s idea to visit the studio was not a disaster. Guy was positioned directly behind her, and she did not want more of his contempt than she’d already received this morning.

“And put your hands on her shoulder. Like that.” He took Thorne’s right hand and put it on Clara’s right shoulder. “And you, *duke*.” The title was almost an insult when Disdéri pronounced it. “Your hand goes here.” He took Guy’s left hand and put it on Octavia’s left shoulder.

Octavia let out her breath. Guy couldn’t blame her for the impropriety this time. He didn’t have to agree to come. Yelverton had obviously talked him into this. She could feel Guy’s impatience at interrupting his day, and she tried not to let it ruin the experience for her.

Disdéri was in no hurry. He adjusted the lighting. He arranged a drape artistically. He placed a potted fern in one corner on a table by a Corinthian column. He pushed Yelverton an inch to the side and back again, then he moved Rushworth. He held up his fingers to frame the picture, squinted, then shifted the vase with the fern slightly to the left.

All the time, Guy’s hand warmed her shoulder. Octavia wanted to shrug it off, even while she fought the thrill of Guy’s touch. Did he squeeze her shoulder? Or was he merely steadying himself? At last, the photo was exposed for fifteen seconds while they held their frozen smiles.

Disdéri shooed the other men away and positioned Guy beside Octavia. “For Estelle.” He squinted, turning them slightly to one side or the other for several minutes, then almost smiled. Octavia squirmed in the chair as the photographer moved Guy closer and closer to her. His chest brushed against her back, and it felt too intimate.

“You finally spoke with Estelle,” Guy whispered. “What did you think?”

“Sssh,” Octavia said. “Smile.” Her leg bounced up and down.

Guy bent over and stopped her leg with one hand. “Hold still.” His breath tickled her ear, and she shifted her pose again.

Disdéri sighed. “A different pose.” He moved Guy to a fluted pillar. “Over here, duke.”

Guy looked so natural and at ease, yet so commanding, like a Greek god.

Disdéri motioned to Octavia. “Wrap your hands around his arm and stand beside him. No whispering this time and look at the camera.”

Octavia heard Rushworth and Thorne snicker. She moved closer to Guy and forced herself not to talk to him. She wanted a photograph, and she didn’t care what they thought.

Guy’s hand wrapped around behind her to rest on the tall potted fern beside them. He complied perfectly with Disdéri’s commands, like a human statue. Or was his hand brushing against her waist of its own accord?

She fought the urge to fidget. Her heart measured every beat of the stopwatch as they waited for the exposure of the silver albumen. Like a fox hunt, she couldn’t wait for the tension to end, but she also wanted the excitement to last.

“And portraits of the women,” Disdéri insisted. Guy’s hand fell away as he left the column. Octavia distinctly felt his touch that time as he moved past her to seat himself with the others who were waiting.

Disdéri seated Octavia again, turned her sideways to examine her profile, then loosened her hair. He framed each curl around her face and moved one tendril onto her neck. He tilted her head and checked his camera, then adjusted her head slightly to one side.

Disdéri moved behind the camera, and Octavia glanced over at him. “No. You don’t look at me or the camera. You look over there.”

Octavia had no idea where he meant.

Disdéri shook his head and motioned to Guy. “Stand over there, by the column again.” Guy moved obediently to the side of the camera. Disdéri waved his hands vaguely at Guy.

“And now, you look at him,” Disdéri said to Octavia. “Look there. Not at the camera.”

Octavia nodded. Disdéri settled himself behind the camera once again. “Don’t nod. Don’t move. Don’t blink.”

Her eyes began to water as she tried to freeze in place. She couldn't protest or question the photographer, unless she wanted her *carte de visite* to show her open-mouthed and gaping. This was an extraordinary chance to have her portrait taken, and she tried to affect a thoughtful expression. She probably looked like as stiff as a log.

Disdéri adjusted something on the camera. Why was this taking so much longer than the other portraits? Octavia took a quick breath and tried to hold the awkward position without moving. She couldn't meet Guy's gaze, afraid of any impatience she might find there. The entire outing had lasted stretched to fill the entire afternoon, and she knew he was eager to return to work.

He thought it was frivolous.

Did he think *she* was?

Was she?

She kept her eyes trained on the floor. Props lay strewn about. An Egyptian headdress and costume lay in one corner, while a Greek costume and Chinese urn littered the floor beside her.

She had gone to the river to watch him swim. She was completely unsuitable to be a duchess, a countess, or a wife for any peer. She was trying to reassure Guy of her regard, and instead she disappointed him. Again.

"Eyes up, mademoiselle," Disdéri said.

Octavia forced herself to meet Guy's gaze.

He mimicked smiling. His arms were crossed, as they so often were when he was giving orders as the Duke of Woodford, and he looked panicked. He pointed at her mouth and once again pretended to smile, but the simper was painfully forced, and his eyes were wide with worry.

All the tension evaporated in an instant. Guy looked like a toad about to have a heart attack. She felt a giggle rising in her chest. She counted to fifteen in her mind before she let the laugh out.

Disdéri came out from behind his camera, disgusted. "Done." He pointed at Clara. "You." He pointed at Thorne. "And you." He pointed to where Guy stood. "Stand there."

Octavia left her seat, trying to rearrange her hair and smooth it, and Clara slipped onto the chair.

Guy came over to her. "I am completely useless. I failed you."

She choked back a laugh. "I wanted a beautiful portrait."

"I smiled at you," Guy said unconvincingly.

Octavia sucked in a deep breath and finally stopped laughing. "You looked like a frog trying to jump the Seine." She couldn't reach the pins that Disdéri had loosened to soften her hairstyle.

"You looked like a firecracker trying not to explode," he retorted. He lifted a stray curl, and his hand grazed her neck. "Allow me."

"It was absurd." She turned around to catch her breath while Guy repinned her coiffure. His fingers tickled her skin repeatedly, and Octavia bit her lip to keep from laughing again.

"It was stunning," Guy said quietly.

"Where did you learn how to pin a woman's hair?" she whispered. Disdéri was rearranging Clara's position and unpinning her bun, too. "You don't have any sisters."

"You can't see what it looks like," Guy said. "I didn't do it well."

Octavia rubbed the back of her neck.

"Did I miss something?" Guy ran his fingers lightly across the back of her neck, as if checking for stray tendrils.

"Stop it," she hissed. "You're doing that on purpose."

Guy pulled back and looked at her innocently. "Doing what?"

Octavia shook her head and whispered, "Honestly. You are at least half of the problem."

He held up his hands. "I'm sorry." He lowered his voice. "Whatever I said—or didn't say—at the river, Octavia...I'm not good at feeling my feelings or expressing them."

She lowered his hands. "Rushworth is watching us." Yelverton was very pointedly *not* watching them while Thorne studied his fingernails.

Guy kept her hand in his own and whispered, "And?"

Octavia shivered. "Don't do that to my ear."

"Do what?" he asked, leaning even closer.

She shuddered at the feel of his breath on her skin. "See what I mean? You are *more* than half of the problem."

"What problem?" Guy smirked. Now Rushworth, Thorne, and Yelverton were all watching them. There were advantages to knowing a duke. No one dared to question his behavior, no matter how outrageous it was.

They only questioned hers.

Octavia snatched her fingers out of his hand and distanced herself. "You asked about Estelle earlier. She is not at all what I expected. Very gentle and generous. She arranged this experience

for me. Why didn't you tell me more about her earlier? I nearly thought she was your—"

Disdéri clapped. "Silence. Now, *Mademoiselle* Clara. Look at *your* lover."

Thorne choked, and Clara's eyes widened. Guy grinned and pointed at himself. He mouthed, "That makes *me* your lover."

Octavia tried not to laugh again. She shook her head at him.

Disdéri raised a hand. "I will begin the exposure in ten seconds. Prepare yourselves."

Octavia studied Clara. She was a classic beauty, but she rarely smiled. Her beauty was stark and almost painful in its sharpness. Clara lifted her eyes, and Thorne's grey eyes connected across the room. His gaze seemed to take in her loosened hair, and her eyes remained fixed solely and attentively on him.

Octavia grinned. Finally, Clara had noticed Thorne, but it was as if he'd never seen her before, either. As his eyes ran over her features, Clara's rigid features seemed to soften. A faint smile played around the edges of her mouth. Delicate lashes framed her eyes, and a hint of wonder and awe mixed with shyness.

Octavia squeezed Guy's arm as everyone seemed to hold their breath for fifteen seconds. Disdéri stepped away from the camera and actually smiled. He gestured at Clara, but he spoke to Octavia. "*That* is how to take a portrait, mademoiselle."

Rushworth pretended to swoon. "Do I get to look at Yelverton to take my portrait?"

Disdéri shooed them out of the studio.

"When may I see the pictures?" Thorne asked eagerly.

"In a week," Disdéri said, shrugging. "Maybe two."

Outside on the sidewalk, Thorne stopped Clara. "Do you require assistance repinning your hair?"

Clara's cheeks pinked. "Will *you* help me, Octavia?"

Octavia let go of Guy's arm and went to fix Clara's untidy hair until they could return to the embassy. She smoothed the sides and slipped the pins back into place. "You look beautiful," she said quietly as the men waited to one side.

Octavia barely heard Clara's reply. "My mother says men only pay attention to me because of my dowry, and I know Reggie only looked at me because Disdéri told him to, but I've never had *anyone* stare at me that way, not even for my dowry."

Tears pricked at Octavia's eyes. She couldn't let her friend think

so ill of herself. “He looked at you that way because you’re beautiful.” *And because he loves you.* But she would let Thorne tell Clara his secret himself someday.

Thorne offered his arm to Clara, but she accepted Yelverton’s hand to assist her into the carriage. Octavia kept up a stream of idle conversation during the short ride back to the embassy, so Clara wouldn’t have to talk to anyone.

As soon as the footman opened the door, Guy scrambled down the steps. Octavia smiled as he eagerly handed her out of the carriage and did not relinquish his grip on her gloved fingers.

She held her breath at his touch, then grinned playfully at him. “I’m still not your mistress, even if Disdéri thinks so.” She called over her shoulder, “Come, Clara, we’ll have my maid fix our hair before either of our mothers sees us.”

Octavia glanced up. The duchess was standing in the middle of the dusty courtyard, waiting to enter a different carriage. She drew on her traveling gloves slowly, then stopped mid-glove as she took in Octavia’s uneven bun and Guy’s fingers intertwined with hers.

Octavia instantly tried to let go, but Guy tightened his grip instead.

Thorne disembarked next, then drew Clara out of the carriage. Her loose bun had fallen out, despite Octavia’s best efforts. The duchess’s eyes grew wider and wider as Yelverton and Rushworth climbed down the steps.

“Go around the side.” The duchess’s quiet voice carried across the courtyard. “Quickly. Guy, you stay. I wish to speak with you.”

He brought her hand close to his heart. “Stay with me,” he whispered. His eyes searched for answers as Rushworth, Yelverton, and Thorne escorted Clara past them. The grooms rushed to fold the stairs and move the carriage. Pharaoh barked from her kennel and the noise pressed in on them. “Set the jokes aside for one moment, Octavia. What am I to you?”

“You have to decide what you *want* to be,” she said. She read the uncertainty in his face. “I cannot answer a man who does not know his own mind.” She gathered her skirts and hurried to find Clara. Lady Proutton must be on her way, and she did not wish to explain why her daughter had arrived home with her hair unpinned in the midst of four gentlemen.

Octavia caught Clara’s arm, giggling, and the two of them wound their way through deserted corridors to her chambers,

where her maid neatly styled their hair. She talked and talked and talked while the braids and twists were redone, but no matter what topic she tried to raise, Clara didn't mention Thorne once.

Clara did mention how well-suited Octavia and Guy seemed at the photographer's studio and asked whether they had mended their differences and hinted that perhaps Octavia might not need to pursue anyone else, if things were going so well with the duke.

Clearly, Octavia had won the wager. Clara must be in love. Now she could claim her forfeit from Guy.



# Chapter 15

Octavia perched on the yellow and blue striped sofa in Guy's library, her legs tucked to one side. She couldn't wait to tell him that she'd won the wager. Clara was clearly in love, and it was due to Octavia's efforts.

She picked up *Boat Life in Egypt and Nubia* and thumbed through it. The travel guide had barely been printed, but already Guy had underlined parts and turned down pages. She began reading as the clock in the corner ticked the minutes.

How long would his meetings last? Octavia picked up her sketchbook and drew a few lines. A man's face took shape. Perhaps a pyramid. A palm tree. She went back to the man and added a rough version of herself next to him. What she wouldn't give to visit Egypt.

Her eyelids grew heavy. A few more details. The man's face took on Guy's appearance. She softened his expression, remembering the concern in his eyes whenever she spoke of Spencer. She drew the clothing exactly as the guidebook described, but her mind grew fuzzy.

She would rest her head for one minute. Octavia set the sketchbook on top of the guidebook and other documents she'd been reading, then let her mind wander.

She imagined herself drifting along the Nile. She'd want to start at Alexandria and visit Cairo. Octavia rearranged the pillow beneath her head. The sofa was surprisingly comfortable.

From Cairo, she'd float up the Nile to Thebes. Octavia pictured the pyramids in her mind. Would palm trees look like the pictures in the guidebooks?

Her eyes fluttered shut, and she dreamed of ancient wonders, of tombs and pyramids and the wise Sphinx. Hieroglyphics swam in and out of her mind amidst a flurry of sand.

A man's deep voice interrupted her voyage of wonder. "You can't sleep in here."

Octavia's steamship cabin was luxurious and full of gleaming treasures. Of course she could sleep there. The Nile cruise had

barely begun.

“It’s three in the morning.” A hand shook her shoulder.

Octavia swatted at the air. Her mosquito net wasn’t working.

A set of hands pulled her off the comfortable bed. Octavia moaned and collapsed against the nearest wall.

The wall pushed her away.

Walls couldn’t push.

Octavia’s eyes flew open, and she pulled her feet out from beneath her. She searched wildly around the darkened room for her assailant. A dark form hovered beside her.

Her mind felt instantly alert, preparing itself for the threat looming ahead. She assessed the possible escape routes. Only one door.

Octavia backed away slowly along the sofa, and her hand hit the stack of books she’d been reading. They crashed to the floor.

The hulking man bent down to collect the volumes. “Octavia,” he growled. “You can’t read my private collection.”

She relaxed onto the cushions. “It’s only you.”

But Guy tensed as he leafed through the stack of papers in his hands. “This is marked private. No one else should read this.”

Octavia yawned. “I was bored.”

Guy crossed to his desk and jammed the papers into a drawer. He locked the drawer and dropped the key into a vest pocket. “Confidential.”

“They were reasonably interesting, though,” Octavia said.

Guy joined her on the sofa. “You cannot tell anyone anything you read.”

Octavia shrugged. “I haven’t said anything all week, have I?” Her eyes adjusted to the dim light. “Can you light another candle? Why is it so dark?”

“No,” he said. “You can leave, and we can go to bed.” He stared at her.

She stopped the thought of Guy following her to her bedchamber as soon as it started. Surely, he hadn’t meant that.

“Pardon. I’m tired. I should have said, it’s time to go to bed.”

Octavia watched him with fascination.

“Without you.” Guy clarified.

She grinned. He was thinking the same thought she was trying not to think. “What kept you awake so late tonight?”

“May I walk you to your room before anyone discovers you here

and you are ruined? Please?"

Octavia sighed. "It would be faster if you would answer my questions."

Guy put a hand on the wall behind her, leaned down, and said in a dangerous voice, "Old friend or not, I am still the head of this embassy. When I ask you to leave my office, I need you to leave."

His frame towered over her. She looked into his eyes, fierce in the candlelight. His jaw was set. "Then you should lock your office more securely."

Guy glowered at her. "How did you get in?"

Octavia relaxed into the sofa. "Answer my question, and I'll answer yours."

He threw his hands in the air. "Rushworth and I are reading the new asylum bill line by line together, so it took twice as long. I briefed Yelverton on the Italian Separatist movement, and thankfully, he's not as dense as I thought. It still took four hours to give him and Thorne an overview."

Octavia considered him. "You didn't come to dinner."

"No!" Guy said. "And my mother stopped by to approve the menus for the next week." He began pacing up and down the room. "The Crown has sent over an architect to begin renovations, and Mother insists on discussing the furnishings of each room in detail."

Octavia nodded and made a sympathetic sound.

"The head gardener wants me to approve the pruning plan for the spring, and I couldn't give a fig what shape any of the hedges are. The housekeeper wishes to order more linens. The butler is in an uproar because someone tried to cheat him and replace the wax candles with tallow."

Guy collapsed beside her. He rubbed a hand over his face. "Why did I accept this post? Why do I do this? I don't care what shade the candles are or how they trim the hedges. They all look like figs to me, honestly. How does that keep England safe?"

Octavia rested a hand on Guy's arm. "Because you cannot invite guests to a dinner party with tallow candles that drip and smell. Your hedges must be manicured and symmetrical. Your meal must impress and intimidate them, and the accommodations must be ready for the prince or princess or queen at any time. The bedsheets must be aired, and the curtains—"

"Please, no curtains at three o'clock in the morning. Mother spent forty-five minutes talking about curtains and cloth alone."

Octavia yawned. "The embassy must host dinners and balls and treaty negotiations and visits from royalty. You're running a hotel to keep the peace."

Guy groaned and dropped his head in his hands.

She set one of her arms on his shoulder to comfort him. It was surprisingly solid. "I asked a footman to let me in, and he did. That's how I broke into your office. No great mystery."

He rubbed his temples. "My own staff has no common sense. You could have been another woman they sent to try to seduce me and steal secrets."

"Another?" Octavia left the sofa. What had happened in France since he'd arrived?

She could see the door across the dimly lit library. She tried to make her way around the silhouetted furniture.

Guy followed her. "Why did you come in here? To steal state secrets?" He took her arm gently and turned her toward him. "Do I need to worry? Tell me honestly, Octavia. I cannot deal with subterfuge."

"Of course not," she said, and raised her chin. "I came to claim my forfeit. I won the wager. Clara is obviously in love with Thorne, and it is all due to my efforts."

Guy laughed. "I do not concede. Until she or Thorne says the words aloud, you don't win."

"But you anticipate it will be me who wins." Octavia grinned. "I'm stealing your book on the Nile to finish reading tomorrow. If you don't want me to break into your office, you can give it to me yourself."

Guy took the book from her. "That's not my guidebook." He flipped through it and a smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

"It's just my sketches," Octavia said. "Italy and such." She reached for it.

The smile widened. "You and me walking in the gardens." He flipped a page. "Me with Pharaoh." Another page. "The alcove?" He grinned wickedly. "Our first kiss. He turned to the end of the sketchbook. "Me with you in—" He stared at her.

"Egypt." Octavia hoped the darkness covered her blush. She grabbed the sketchbook out of his hands.

He laughed. "You can have the guidebook to finish your drawing, after I am done reading it, but I will warn the footmen about you." He reached around her for the doorhandle. "Now I'm

more curious than ever to read the book.”

Octavia waited for him to open the door for her, but instead she heard a click.

His arm wrapped around her shoulder as he tugged her away from the door and leaned over her. “Maybe we can take one moment to say goodnight, if I’m certain no one will see us.”

Her mouth went dry. “We’re slowing down,” Octavia whispered. “You shouldn’t have locked the door.”

“I cannot restrain myself around you,” Guy said. “You bring out the worst in me.”

Her shock rooted her to the spot.

Guy traced her lower lip with his finger. “You’re pouting.”

“I should slap you,” Octavia said. She fumbled at the doorknob as tears welled in her eyes. “Goodnight.” The hurt began deep in her stomach and radiated all the way to the top of her chest.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I meant that I’m the worst version of myself around you.”

Octavia ran her hands over his vest, searching for the pocket with the key.

Guy groaned. “I hate it when I hurt your feelings. Everything comes out wrong. What I mean is that *I love you*, and I don’t know what to do with these strong emotions. I haven’t felt like this before, and it’s overpowering me. It’s not your fault. When I saw that you’ve been sketching our time together and thinking about me, too...I felt hope that you returned my feelings. I’m so sorry.”

*He loved her?* Octavia’s attention shifted to the feel of his body beneath her hands. Her head barely reached his shoulders, and she studied the fabric-covered buttons on his vest. Her own emotions fought to break free.

“I love you, too, Guy, but I’ve always loved you,” she said, hardly daring to hope.

He tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. “I know what I want. I want to *love* you, Octavia, and not the way I did when you were twelve.” He searched her face. “Do you love me that way, too?”

She answered immediately. “Yes.” Then Octavia smirked at him. “But you don’t bring out the worst in me.”

“Don’t I?” Guy grinned wickedly. “Do you usually go down to the river and watch men swim?”

She bit her lip. “Well, perhaps I have not exercised my best judgment recently.” She moved her hands up the snug fabric of his

waistcoat. "You purchased a new vest."

Guy quirked a half-smile. "Striped. Like you suggested."

She fiddled with the buttons.

He covered her hands with his own. "May I kiss you goodnight? Even if I'm an idiot?"

Octavia nodded again. "Since you're an idiot who loves me."

He lowered his head, and Octavia closed her eyes. His kiss was gentle, as if he could heal her heart with an apology. She balanced on her tiptoes and wound her arms around his neck to strengthen the kiss.

Guy responded and wrapped her in his embrace. Time slowed to a crawl as the warmth spread into every lonely place of her heart. Flickers of candlelight danced in the darkness around them.

Guy lifted her off her feet and swung her around. A smile split his face. "You really love me like that?"

She laughed as he set her down. "I already answered that question. I'll let you know if I change my mind."

Guy pushed a curl off her face. "Then I won't ask again."

Octavia met his gaze. "Ask as often as you wish, and the answer won't change."

Guy traced his fingers along the bare skin where her curls hung. "You were so beautiful this afternoon. When Disdéri arranged your curls on your neck, I couldn't wait to play with them. I thought of you all evening, and when I saw you sleeping here, I hardly had the strength to wake you."

Octavia brushed her lips against his. The newness of their intimacy sparked fire in her heart, and her pulse raced. She kissed him again until she had forgotten to breathe. Guy drew her close and toyed with the ruffles on the back of her dress. "You ordered a new dress." He sketched a line across her shoulders.

"Pharaoh has ruined the others," she said, shivering, and drew her arms away. The tingles cascaded from her shoulders down to her toes, and her heart beat so loudly she could hardly breathe. "Goodnight. I can walk myself all the way across the corridor to my chambers."

Guy reached behind her to unlock the door. His voice was low and husky. "But I'm willing to talk about the modiste."

Octavia patted his cheek. "It's three o'clock in the morning." And she knew she had even less self-control than Guy did.

Guy skimmed her cheek with his fingers. "I'm talking to you

about ruffles. Do you realize how much I love you?"

She threw her arms around him again and held him tight. Nothing had ever felt better in her life. "Thank you, but we're slowing down. Remember? And I'm still tired. And I'm still in your personal library unchaperoned."

Guy groaned and opened the door. "Now you agree to leave, when I don't want you to go?"

"Precisely," Octavia said, and yawned. "You're beginning to understand me at last."

# Chapter 16

The last-minute invitation was an olive branch. The French ambassador had offered Guy a private, guided tour of the new exhibit at the Louvre before the exhibit opened to the public tomorrow. Guy could bring ten guests. Only the finest elite of Paris would attend this exclusive showing, and the British were allowed to mingle with them this evening.

And he had stopped calling for his resignation.

But at what cost? How had Guy risen so high in his counterpart's esteem overnight? His head of staff delivered the invitation with a knowing smile on his face. "Late evening?"

Guy read the gilded invitation and immediately wrote a response to accept it. He was restoring England in the good graces of France, but he had Octavia's reputation to worry about. "Don't allow anyone into my personal library, my office, my chambers, or anywhere they shouldn't be." He couldn't dream of all the ways Octavia could get into mischief, but he hoped that last bit might at least cover some of her potential for trouble.

Guy fought the throb in his temples that had accompanied him since he woke. He had a headache most days now, with so little sleep and so much to do.

He sealed the letter. "Please have this delivered immediately. I'll be attending the Louvre tonight. Inform my mother, the Shelfords, the undersecretaries, and the Prouttons that they are invited to a tour of the exhibit this evening at eight o'clock."

Guy had expected Octavia to ride with him in the carriage, but she had maneuvered Thorne and Lady Clara into the six-person carriage, and he was stuck with Yelverton and Rushworth in a bachelor's carriage.

Now that Yelverton had decided to throw himself into work, he was relentless. He didn't stop talking about the Italian quest for unification during the entire ride.

And then he didn't stop talking about the history of art when they entered the Louvre. Guy wasn't sure what he had done to earn



Yelverton's undying loyalty, but he wasn't sure he wanted it. Guy finally had to pull him aside. "You want to be useful?"

Yelverton nodded.

"Accompany the French ambassador. Listen to the tour guide and don't talk. And thank them both profusely on my behalf."

"You're deputizing me?" Yelverton's overeager face flushed red.

"Exactly," Guy said. "Let's test the waters to see how you would do as a deputy ambassador."

Yelverton grinned and rushed off. He still had so much to learn, but they could work on having a dignified, reserved presence another time.

He searched for Octavia among the crowd, but she was hanging on Thorne's arm. The guide explained about the use of color and light, and she examined the painting. Her face lit up as she listened to the docent.

She used to paint, before Spencer and her father died. She had filled the old nursery with colorful canvases. Guy watched her, distracted, as she moved to the next painting. She gestured toward something. Thorne leaned closer to the painting and nodded his head in agreement.

Guy wanted to be there. He wanted to hear what she was saying. Instead, he escorted his mother at the back of the group.

"You're missing the exhibit."

Guy startled and turned to her. "Pardon?"

"You're distracted this evening."

He tried to remember anything about the exhibit, and he couldn't. Mother was right. He wouldn't be able to talk intelligently at the reception afterward.

"If it's affecting your ability to function in your role, then take steps to fix the problem," Mother said serenely.

Guy tried to focus on the lecture, but Mother's statement ran through his head. Was Octavia a problem? She was certainly a distraction.

"It's not wise for the Shelfords to return to England yet." He could probably ensure her safety, if enough measures were taken. The thought filled his steps with lead, and he slowly moved to the next painting.

What had Octavia seen in this portrait that had delighted her? Guy listened for any insights from the tour guide that he could use in conversation later.

“That isn’t the only solution,” Mother whispered, and pointed to Lord and Lady Proutton ahead of them. Lady Proutton craned her neck backward and eyed them with interest.

“Shall we talk later?” Mother raised her voice. “I’m glad Mr. Thorne is doing so well. The queen is receiving your reports about your undersecretaries?”

Guy stared at her. Mother nodded toward the Prouttons. How had she become involved in Octavia’s matchmaking scheme?

He raised his voice to match his mother’s. “Yes, I’m impressed with him. Fine man. I consider him a friend as well as an asset to the nation.”

The Prouttons’ attention seemed to snap back to Octavia and Thorne, huddled together in front of a picture of children playing on a beach. Thorne pointed out features of the painting, and Octavia seemed to sway into his side as she studied it.

Guy clenched his fist. She didn’t need to act quite so convincingly.

Lady Clara walked with Lord Yelverton, and Mr. Rushworth accompanied Lady Shelford. As the group reached an open gallery, Lord Proutton approached Guy. “How are your new recruits?” He waved a pudgy hand toward Yelverton and Rushworth.

“Useful additions to the staff,” Guy said carefully.

“Always thought *Lord* Yelverton was a fine man, like his father,” Lord Proutton said.

Guy deliberated. The Prouttons were still intent on pursuing a title for their daughter. “Indeed, as are Thorne and Rushworth. They both come from established families.”

“But, you know. A member of the House of Lords.”

Guy put on his most affronted look. “I’m afraid I don’t know.”

Lord Proutton’s chin shot up. “You can’t deny it takes a man of quality to handle our load.”

Guy gave Lord Proutton his most withering look. “You and I do not share the same burdens simply because we are both in the House of Lords.”

Lady Proutton entered the conversation. “But you won’t promote Thorne or Rushworth to deputy ambassador. The queen would never stand for that.”

Guy stared through her. They would try to use his opinions to force their daughter to marry someone she didn’t love, and he wouldn’t be a part of it.

"I would recommend any one of those three men to the queen," Guy said without hesitation.

Lord Prounton arched an eyebrow, and Lady Prounton returned her gaze to Octavia and Thorne.

Guy followed her eyes across the room. The lecture had ended, and guests were milling about the exhibit. Octavia threw back her head and laughed, and Thorne drew her arm through his. They disappeared into the next chamber.

Guy gritted his teeth. "Rushworth? Could you escort my mother for a bit?"

Rushworth smiled. "I should be delighted to accompany two beautiful widows."

Lady Shelford rapped him on the arm with her fan. "I've heard about your penchant for widows. Would you like to hear the latest news about Mrs. Phillips? You know that I correspond with her aunt, of course..."

Guy lengthened his stride to catch up with Thorne. He waited to one side of Octavia, but she didn't notice him. She listened to Thorne explain about the texture of the brushstrokes and the artist's technique.

The French ambassador glanced over at Guy and arched his brow. Yelverton was talking to the guide about the exhibit, and the ambassador stared pointedly at Octavia and Thorne, engrossed in conversation.

Guy cleared his throat. Octavia startled. "Your Grace!" She turned back to Thorne. "The colors dance across the canvas. I've never seen anything like it. The attention to detail is astounding."

Thorne waved his hands at the enormous painting surrounded by a heavy gilded frame. "And yet, the artistry captures a feeling, not just a moment. One can almost feel the sand at the beach and the joy of the children."

It was as if they spoke a foreign language.

"The thin, fine lines are so different from the thick textures of the last painting," Octavia said.

"Did you notice the exaggerated proportions?" Thorne asked.

Octavia grew excited. "They seemed intentional. The nose on that likeness—"

They both laughed. Guy didn't even know which portrait they meant.

Thorne turned to him. "Do you paint?"

Guy shook his head. "My favorite artist is Lady Octavia. Watching her paint is enough for me."

Octavia swatted him on the arm. "I'm no artist."

"I stand by my opinion," Guy said. "Her analysis is as eloquent as her paintings were at home."

Octavia slipped her arm through his. "Let me show you my favorites." She left Thorne without a glance. When she had led them toward a painting in the corner, she whispered, "I just fell even more in love with you."

She gazed up at him, and he felt like he was the *Mona Lisa* to her. His jealousy vanished in the depths of her emerald eyes.

"I hate crowds," Guy said.

Octavia pretended to study the painting's brilliant colors. "At least act like you're enjoying the exhibit."

"I am." Guy watched her face as she took in every detail. He tore his eyes away from her. "Will you explain this painting to me?"

Octavia squinted. Adorable dimples formed at the sides of her mouth as she considered the art. "The subdued style of this artist belies his skill. The vibrancy of the hue attracts the eye at the initial observation, but it is the subtle use of detail that is the hallmark of his sophistication."

Guy glanced at the placard beside the painting. "You read that off the wall."

She nodded serenely. "Now you know my trick."

Guy studied the thick texture of the paint, willing himself to understand anything that Octavia had just told him.

The French ambassador approached them. A waiter with a tray of hors d'oeuvres trailed behind him. They sampled the delicate pastries together and compared favorites in a rare moment of camaraderie.

"Thank you for the invitation," Guy said. "It's a rare treat to see the Louvre with so few visitors tonight."

"And you have some Egyptian antiquities," Octavia breathed, as if awestruck.

The ambassador bowed over Octavia's hand. "You might have missed the Renaissance portrait gallery." He lowered his voice. "It isn't as popular as the others." He indicated a gallery to his left and winked at Guy.

Guy led Octavia around the corner to a deserted room of the museum. Dark, somber portraits hung on every wall. The oppressive

feeling was broken by an occasional smile, but most of the subjects were serious. "No wonder no one comes in here," he said. He could hardly make out the details in the deep browns and reds behind the men dressed in black coats.

Octavia slid her arms around his waist. "Am I really your favorite artist?"

Guy knew he shouldn't risk anything here, where anyone might walk around the corner, but she was looking up at him with such trust and hope. "Yes." He leaned down to kiss her quickly. Since no one was watching, he kissed her again, longer, and he let himself linger, enjoying the feel of her lips and her fingers curling into his hair. They drew apart reluctantly, and Octavia's eyes widened. He tucked her into his side protectively and turned around.

Rushworth blocked the archway between the two rooms. Mother and Lady Shelford flanked him on either side. Rushworth's lips twitched with a smile, while Mother merely looked exasperated.

But Lady Shelford's face was tight with anger. "I hope no one else saw that," she said. She glared at Guy and Octavia, but her voice was deadly calm. "You're going to ride with the duchess and me in the private carriage. We need to talk about taking our time and not rushing things." She took a slow, steadying breath. "*Again.*"

# Chapter 17

Octavia glared at the metal steps leading out of the carriage and into the courtyard. Guy wouldn't even look at her after the scolding Mama had given both of them. She refused to take his outstretched hand, since he refused to look at her.

"Come on," Guy grumbled. "Your mother won't reprimand us for this."

But she heard Mama sniff behind her. "For what?" the shrill voice demanded. Mama tried to see over Octavia's shoulder. "What is he doing now, after I just spoke to him?"

"Nothing," Octavia said. "You should be more worried about what the horses have just done, honestly." As much as the grooms tried to keep the courtyard clean, they couldn't keep up with the horses, who seemed to confuse the courtyard with their stalls.

The grooms were tossing hay on the mess, perhaps to hide it or make it easier to clean. Octavia tried to figure out a way to step around it when she arrived at the bottom and still descend without any assistance. Guy waited to one side. When their eyes finally met, his gaze seared her. "Let me be a gentleman and help you. Please." He offered her his hand again.

Octavia was glad Mama couldn't see the way Guy was looking at her. She rushed to put distance between them. "No, thank you. I can manage." She pushed his hand aside, stumbled down the steps, and missed the bottom rung entirely. Guy's arms shot out, breaking her fall, but she still landed hard on the packed dirt of the courtyard.

Her wrists stung where she had caught herself. Pebbles cut through her thin silk gloves as pain shot up both arms. Mud and straw and filth coated her face, her hands, her new dress. In the corner kennel, Pharaoh howled.

"Fezziwig!" Octavia muttered. "Cratchit all."

"Watch your language," Mama said sharply behind her. "A lady is always a lady."

Octavia snorted and pushed down her crinoline hoop. "Except when she lands in a pile of fresh—"

“Octavia,” Mama said warningly, as she climbed out of the carriage.

“Scrooge,” Octavia finished. She wiped the filth from her face and examined her ruined gloves. She cradled her left wrist in her right arm. She didn’t have the strength to push up from the ground or try to stand. She avoided Guy’s gaze. If she could get a footman to help her to her room...

Could this evening be any more of a disaster? She wouldn’t be able to walk without assistance, and she most certainly did not want any help from the grouch standing next to her.

Everyone stared at her, expecting her to bounce right up.

Suddenly, Guy’s arm wrapped around her waist, and his voice tickled her ear. “I have you.”

Mama nearly screeched. “Woodford! What are you doing?” She faced him. “I thought I made myself clear.”

“You did.” He glowered. “If you had allowed me to court your daughter when I asked, we wouldn’t be in this predicament. She refuses to even accept my help out of the carriage now.” He tightened his grip on her waist. His knees were deep in the same excrement she was covered with.

Mama pinched her lips together. “A footman can help her.” She glanced around at the grooms, who all held shovels or were pushing wheelbarrows full of horse droppings.

The pain shot knives through her wrist and up her arm. “Can we go?” Octavia whispered. “Quickly? It hurts.” Tears stung the sides of her eyes.

Guy wrapped his other arm around her shoulder and helped her unsteadily to her feet. “No footman will hold Octavia like this,” he said. He cradled her injured arm with his. “Put your weight on me. Can you walk?” He sized her up.

She bit her lip and nodded. Both wrists hurt now, and her cheek and shoulder stung. She didn’t even know what else hurt or where she had landed when she fell, but her knees were wobbly.

That could have been from the way Guy held her, though.

He gently assisted her, one slow step at a time, through the darkened midnight courtyard, into the side entrance of the embassy, and slowly up the curved marble stairway, one foot at a time. Mama and the duchess followed wordlessly behind.

The searing pain grew hotter and hotter, and Octavia took a great gulp of air. “This is folly. You need a doctor now,” Guy said.

He grunted and lifted her into his arms. She squealed and nestled against him to keep from falling, but he cradled her close. "I promise that I have you. You will always be safe with me."

He strode away from Mama, and his long legs carried them swiftly through a long corridor that led toward the family apartments. Octavia held her arm tightly to keep it from hurting with each step they took. Guy stopped and drew a deep breath, but kept her firmly in his arms. "You barely weigh more than my Great Dane."

Octavia's heart pounded in time with his. Her head was buried in his shoulder, and she tilted it up to look at him. "You must learn not to say the first thing that jumps into your mind. Did you just compare me to Pharaoh?"

The glint in his eyes took her breath away. "Oh, my mind is not in the kennel," he said. Guy heaved her closer to him and crossed the hallway to her door. "Is this your bedchamber?"

A thrill of excitement shot through her. Behind them, Octavia heard Mama's shrill voice reverberating in the corridor. If she wasn't careful, she'd wake up the entire embassy, and Mama had lectured *them* on discretion.

"Yes. You should know that."

"I wanted to be sure." Guy slammed into the door of her bedchamber with his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Octavia asked. "The key is in my pocket." She hugged her left arm tightly to her chest and dug around in her pocket with the other to produce a small iron key. Guy groaned as her cheek brushed his ear and his neck. His mouth was right there. If she turned her lips the slightest bit...

Footsteps echoed in the corridor. Guy shifted her weight as he bent his knees to try to fit the key in the lock, and she only fell deeper into his embrace.

The door swung open, and Guy staggered through the maze of furniture in her cramped drawing room to her bedchamber. He cradled her in his arms, and her eyes flew to his, uncertain what his behavior meant. She trusted him, but a recklessness seemed to have come over him.

Guy searched the room for something as she balanced precariously in his arms. Finally, he tore a lap quilt off a chair with one arm, covered her bed, and gently lowered her onto her bed.

Octavia tried to scramble into sitting position and push her



muddy skirts down, but the pain in her arms was too much. She could only cradle her left arm. Guy found another blanket and tossed it over her skirts, then pulled it over her bare shoulders.

He tumbled to the floor and rested his head on the side of her bed. Even a man as athletic as Guy couldn't carry her that far without getting tired.

Mama rushed into the room, one hand over her heart. "What do you think you're doing?"

The duchess quietly entered the crowded bedchamber behind her and moved past Mama. "I rang for some hot water and towels. We'll clean you up, dear. Lay back and rest."

Octavia glanced at the pillows behind her.

"I'll get clean linens later. Never mind about the mud and Scrooge."

Octavia smiled at the duchess.

Mama sniffed.

Guy knelt by her bed, and the spark in his eyes scorched her as his gaze ran over her wrists and arms and bare shoulders and neck and, finally, every feature on her face. His gaze lingered on her lips, then traveled back up to her eyes.

"I hate it when you're injured," he said.

Octavia's chin wobbled.

"We need a doctor," Guy said. "I'll send for someone and return."

Mama's face tightened. "You won't. This is her personal bedchamber. There's no reason for you to be here."

Guy froze, halfway between kneeling and standing. He returned to his kneeling position on the floor. The intensity in his eyes grew to a fire. "Octavia, give me a reason to be here. I beg you. Marry me, please." He ran a muddy hand over his face and through his pale hair. "I cannot leave you like this."

The shock made her feel light. "What did you say?"

Guy grinned. "Octavia Shelford, will you please marry me and be my wife?"

Octavia laughed as her heart began to flutter. "I thought it was something like that."

Mama spluttered. Guy rose to his feet and faced her in the cramped space between the bed and the wall. "Please, Lady Shelford. There wouldn't be anything inappropriate if we were engaged, and you were here, too."

Octavia tried to shift positions on the bed and winced. Guy knelt by her bedside again and grasped her hand between his. He searched her face. "I'm not leaving. Someone else can fetch the blasted doctor. You're in too much pain." He stroked the hair away from her face.

"You're leaving more mud," Octavia said. Her heart beat as quickly as butterflies' wings.

"Do you want me to leave?" Guy's brow furrowed.

She realized she hadn't answered his proposal. "Of course!" She laughed, and all the joy in the world wasn't enough to fill her heart.

Guy collapsed backward against the wall. "Oh."

"I meant, 'Of course I want to marry you.'" Octavia giggled. "Not, 'Of course you should leave.'" The pain subsided for a moment.

Guy's mouth hung open a little, and he shook his head, then his face broke into a grin, and smile lines creased the edges of his eyes. He knelt again and reached for her, but Mama bustled in between them.

Mama's face was a jumble of emotions, as she blocked Guy from Octavia's view. "At midnight? Why do you two"—she shook her head, looking between them—"always do these things at such a late hour?" She collapsed on the edge of Octavia's bed.

"Ouch!" Octavia's whole body throbbed with pain.

Mama stood back up. "So sorry." She knocked into the duchess, who steadied herself and barely avoided falling on Octavia. Mama was more flustered than Octavia had ever seen her. "I'm so sorry, dear. Guy, fetch the doctor."

He didn't leave. "Your daughter accepted my proposal."

Octavia tried to reach her hand out to Guy, but couldn't. "Yes. I won't be his mistress. I'll actually be his wife." She laughed with joy.

Mama moved past Guy and the duchess to the other side of Octavia's bed and collapsed onto a chair. She buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

"I didn't expect *that* reaction," Guy said.

Mama waved her hand at him. "Fine. Yes. Marry her." She burst into fresh sobs.

The duchess whispered, "Fetch the doctor, son, for both of them."

Guy leaned over Octavia. His eyes were the color of a cloudless

sky. She could fall into them forever.

His voice was thick and rough. "I'm so happy."

Her dress was covered in filth, her shoulders were scraped raw from landing on rocks, and the throb in her wrists was building to a burn. She wanted to pull Guy down and kiss him for hours, but Mama was still hiccupping with happy tears, and the duchess was watching with a discreet smile.

A maid arrived with a basin and pitcher of hot water and clean towels. Guy drew off Octavia's torn silk gloves tenderly, gently removing tiny pebbles from the palms of her hands and throwing them into the basin where the pitcher rested. He sponged her hands gingerly and then her arms, and the water eased some of the sting.

Guy's blazing smile and his steady gaze as he tended to her also washed away any uncertainty or loneliness she had ever felt. He dipped a cloth in the warm water and eyed a rip in her dress.

"I'll do the shoulders," Her Grace said. "You can call the doctor now."

Guy grinned at Octavia as he eyed the muck-covered shoulders. "I'm happy to help."

"I'm sure you are," the duchess said. "But there are limits, and an off-the-shoulder evening gown will be attended by me, not you." She met his gaze.

Mama sniffed in the corner. "Quite right."

Guy dipped a clean cloth in the warm water and sponged some dirt from her cheek. "Pity," he muttered. He brushed the cloth against her skin as his eyes caressed her features.

"Now," Her Grace said softly. "Doctor. Leave."

Guy groaned and set the cloth in the basin. He pushed to his feet and pressed a quick kiss to the clean spot on her cheek, leaving fresh mud from his own face.

"And clean yourself before you return," his mother said. "And then come wipe this floor where you've been kneeling and getting mud everywhere."

He groaned again. "Dr. Browne works wonders. He tends to all the needs at the embassy. I'll send for him directly, and I'll return with more towels and water." He pivoted and raced from the room.

Mama's sobs subsided.

Octavia watched Guy's well-fitted trousers disappear from the room as his muscled legs moved quickly. Her insides tingled with the memory of his strong, gentle arms cradling her to keep her safe.

And he would be her husband. Octavia sighed. “He’s too wonderful.”

Mama took great gulps of air, and a fresh round of crying began. “One week. Didn’t I tell you, Jane?” She smiled at Octavia. “Don’t worry. These are happy tears. Mostly.”

Her Grace moved over to the side of the bed and began to carefully clean Octavia’s muck-splattered shoulders. Her voice was barely audible over Mama’s hiccupping sobs. “Welcome to the family, daughter.”

# Chapter 18

Guy paced the length of the library without seeing any of the books. Back and forth across the red and blue rug, staring at the intricate design woven into its fibers. He would have to tell Yelverton. Would Thorne, Rushworth, and Yelverton leave?

He had spent hours training them and now, finally, he had trusted them enough to give them assignments. He'd actually felt a flicker of hope that Yelverton wasn't completely useless, but this would change things.

Once Yelverton understood that Octavia was engaged to someone else and would never marry him, would he be furious? Or worse, would he become a pathetic ninny?

Guy examined the papers tucked in the corner of his locked drawer. A rough draft of England's defense against a French invasion. Had Octavia read that, or was someone else sneaking into his office? Add that to his worries. An unplanned engagement. War with France. Losing all three of his new undersecretaries. Was there a spy, or was Octavia still reading all his missives when she was bored?

He sighed and took out the papers. A whiff of violet greeted him. One less worry. It was just Octavia reading the defense plan.

But Mother wanted to talk about the renovations again. She opened the door of the library, waved a sheet of paper at him, and opened her mouth to speak.

Guy interrupted her. "Ask Octavia. She will be the new mistress of the embassy." He winced at his own choice of words. "You know what I mean. I trust her to choose everything."

Mother stiffened and drew herself up. "I see."

He couldn't tell whether Mother was hurt by his abrupt answer or because he was going to let Octavia take over as head of the household. "Wait, please. I'm sorry."

Mother entered the library. "You're quite right."

"It will be easier if we treat her as if we're already married. You can acquaint her with the duties of a duchess. There's a lot to learn."

Mother smiled uneasily. "After all these years of waiting for a daughter, and all the times you deliberated and held back from courting someone? I am pleased." Her posture didn't relax, though.

He heard the hesitation. *But...* He'd avoided his feelings for Octavia for the last two years because he *didn't* believe she was old enough for so much responsibility. Mother knew that. Octavia had flashes of insight and was an intuitive hostess, but she was also impulsive and scattered at times.

"I trust her, but she's young, and she needs guidance," Guy said. "She'll benefit from your wisdom."

Mother tutted. "Are you calling me old?"

Guy shook his head. Mother was beautiful and could easily remarry, if she ever wished to. A dowager duchess would be in great demand. "Wise. How old are you? Not even fifty years. Forty-five?"

Mother smiled gently. "You know how to flatter me. I'm fifty-two, as I suspect you are aware." She held up a list. "Does this mean I should ask her to approve the menus instead of you?"

Guy let out a sigh of relief. That would free up some of his time. "Yes."

"And the housekeeping arrangements?"

Even better. "Certainly. And she can meet with the head gardener. She has a passion for flowers and a better eye than I do."

"You're asking a lot of her all at once," Mother said. "She may not welcome those responsibilities. You saw how overcome Lady Shelford was last night."

Guy waved her worries away. "This is Octavia. She can do anything." Maybe even replace that horrible blend of tea he had to drink every afternoon. He peered at his mother. "Has Lady Shelford resigned herself to our match?"

"My dear boy, Arabella is delighted. They were tears of joy."

Guy arched an eyebrow.

"And it's her baby girl, all grown up. It's hard for a parent to let go of her child."

He peered at his widowed mother. What would she do without him, once he married? She had never shown any interest in remarrying. "Is it?"

"I'm fine," Mother said. "This match has been the dearest wish of my heart for years. Why do you think I invited them here in the first place, and why do you think Lady Shelford accepted?"

Guy wasn't surprised by his mother's admission of matchmaking, given that Lady Shelford had already admitted the same motive, but he couldn't help noticing the crease between her eyes as she left the library. *Why?* Octavia was unstoppable. Menus and silverware were no match for her. Certainly not a hedge or a bit of shrubbery.

Add Mother to his list of worries now. How would he still take care of her and allow Octavia to become the new duchess without hurting Mother's feelings?

He blew out a long breath. He would figure it out later. With those household responsibilities relegated to Octavia, he'd have more time to focus on the upcoming negotiations and training his undersecretaries, if they stayed.

*Yelverton.* Guy left the library and sought him out. He was still in the breakfast room. It sounded like someone was finishing a story. Guy heard a burst of laughter. He steeled himself and entered the room.

Rushworth and Yelverton immediately stopped talking. Yelverton wiped his mouth with a napkin and sprang to his feet. "Coming now. Lost track of time." He searched the room for a clock. "Egad. Eleven already?"

Thorne had his gaze trained on Lady Clara, but she'd looked away the moment Guy entered the room. Her parents sat across the table from Yelverton. The crumbs on their plates made it clear that they'd finished their breakfast hours ago.

He waited for congratulations or anger. Nothing. Octavia must have slept in or taken a breakfast tray in her room. No one seemed to know about the engagement. Guy seated himself beside Thorne. "Pardon the interruption. Were you in the middle of a conversation?"

Thorne's eyes wished him miles away, but Lady Clara said, "Oh, we were done talking. Right, Reggie?"

Thorne's amused resignation was directed toward Guy. He kept his back to Lady Clara, as if he didn't want to give any more of himself to her than he already had. "Right." He pushed away from the table. "I was only telling you my worries about my sisters and how soon they'll have to be launched into Society and married. And the falling price of grain for my farmers. And the need for repairs, which is hard to supervise from France." He gave Guy an ironic look. "But that's nothing. Where's Lady Octavia? *She'll* want to make matches for all my sisters."

The conversation stopped, and all eyes turned to Guy. "Octavia fell last night. I wouldn't be surprised if she keeps to her room for a day or two. A slight sprain of the wrist and a few scrapes. Her knee might have been bruised."

As if to prove him wrong, Octavia hobbled into the room. Her fair hair curled around her face like an angel, and her newest fitted dress was exquisite. She'd never looked so beautiful, and he'd been admiring her for years. He would know.

Guy sprang to his feet to help her.

"Has he told you, or did you leave the surprise for me to share, darling?" Octavia slipped her right arm through his and wobbled a little. A sling wrapped around her left arm.

He cleared his throat. Octavia clung to him, and she clearly needed to rest in bed or on a sofa with her foot on a stool. Guy covered her hand with his own and caressed her fingers softly, unsure whether she had recovered yet. "I left the surprise for you, my dear."

Yelverton exchanged a wide-eyed glance with Rushworth. Thorne stopped his exit from the room and turned around to watch the spectacle.

Octavia wrapped her arm even tighter around Guy, stabilizing herself, and drawing herself inappropriately close to him. She smiled up at him, and her eyes danced with a mixture of joy and mischief. "We're engaged."

The relief on Lady Clara's face was obvious, and she inclined her head in congratulations. She had never wanted him to court her, and he smiled back at her.

Thorne crossed the room and clapped him on the back. "Diplomacy at work, old man. Well done, and congratulations."

Yelverton rounded the table and stiffly held out his hand. "Congratulations." It was just as Guy feared. For all his protestations, Yelverton was still enamored of Octavia.

Rushworth pumped his hand. "Tell me how you did it. Wish it were me." He turned to Octavia. "He's deuced lucky, you know. We're green with envy. You've made one man happy, and three men miserable."

Octavia smiled. "You know I love all of you."

Rushworth looked guiltily at the duke, but Guy grinned stupidly back at the breakfast room. Octavia adored him, and he finally felt secure in her affections.



She played with the fabric on his coat sleeve. "There's never been anyone for me but Guy."

Rushworth laughed. "A lost cause for the rest of us. You're a lucky, lucky man, Duke."

Guy couldn't wipe the wide smile off his face. "The luckiest. She's an angel."

The Prouttos sniffed behind him. *Snobs*.

"I almost thought I'd lost her to you last night, Thorne. I daresay her mother would have favored you over me."

Thorne and Rushworth laughed, and Lady Clara joined them. "Yes, you two were quite cozy last night, Reggie."

Guy continued. "I had to act quickly before she forgot her childhood friend and had her heart stolen by the worthy competition I see here." He locked eyes with Yelverton.

Octavia wobbled again. "Thorne and I are both artists. That is our special bond." She smiled, but Guy detected the strain in her voice.

"May I help you to a parlor to meet with Mother?" He traced his fingers lightly around her wrist, then lowered his voice. "You walked all the way down here alone, my brave girl. Are you in pain?"

She nodded, her lips pressed together.

He cleared his throat. "Yelverton, could you accompany us? Octavia needs to rest."

Lady Clara's voice stopped him before they left the parlor. "Congratulations. I'm so pleased for the both of you. What a romantic story. You've known each other your whole lives, and here you are, so devoted to each other."

Again, Thorne's back was turned to Lady Clara. He shot another ironic look at Guy, but this time he looked like he wanted to punch something. Guy knew that kind of frustration.

"Thank you. Love can be surprising." He sent a sideways glance at Thorne. "I could use your help, too. We need to talk."

"I feel left out," Rushworth said.

Guy laughed. "Very well. Octavia, your admirers and I will all escort you. Please excuse us, Lady Clara. Lord and Lady Prouton."

They slowly struggled down the hall to a bright yellow receiving room. Guy put his arm around Octavia to help her without any worries about impropriety. His undersecretaries followed without any whispering. The staff smiled broadly at him. Why had he

waited an entire week to get engaged?

Guy asked a footman to rearrange the furniture for Octavia's comfort, while Rushworth scrambled to find a pillow to support her arm. Guy sent another footman to alert Mother of Octavia's whereabouts.

"I've asked Mother to give you full responsibility for everything you'll do when you're my wife." He relished the words. "Anything related to the household is now your responsibility. I'll tell the staff, too."

He couldn't tell whether the discomfort on her face was related to her wrist and knee or the idea of suddenly running an embassy. "Are you well?"

Octavia beamed at him. "Never happier." She glanced sideways at the three men. "Does this mean I can kiss you in public now?"

Guy laughed. "No."

"Then what's the point of an engagement?" Octavia said. Her lower lip was pouting in an incredibly tempting way.

"We'll be in the Blue Room," Thorne said. He tugged at Yelverton's elbow. "Come on." Yelverton slowly followed Rushworth out of the room.

Guy bent over Octavia and traced her lower lip with a finger. "There are footmen everywhere. People are watching us every minute of the day."

Octavia curled her hands in the lapels of his coat and pulled him down. She kissed him on the mouth. "I don't care. What are they going to do? Say I'm compromised and tell us to get married?"

It was hard to laugh and kiss at the same time, but Guy managed it.

He sauntered into the Blue Room and pulled up a chair at the long, polished mahogany table. "I owe you, Thorne." It was hard to worry about anything right now. "One favor in the bank."

Thorne nodded. "We're here to assist you. It looked like you needed a private moment."

Guy grinned. "You're proving yourself invaluable. Stick around." He sobered. "Have any of you decided if you'd like to stay at the embassy or join the Foreign Service? Yelverton?"

The viscount wouldn't meet his eyes. "I told you I would, and I will."

"Even with the change in circumstances?" Guy asked. "With

Octavia as my wife?"

Yelverton met his gaze. "Especially now." There was a new fierceness in his voice. "I'm going to become the kind of man that women seek out, instead of me chasing after them."

An awkward silence filled the room.

"I'm glad you're staying. I need a deputy ambassador," Guy said. "Keep working hard, and the position is yours. Rushworth? Thorne?"

"I told you I'd stay, if the Crown wants me," Thorne said. "Having Lady Octavia here is even more incentive."

Guy could feel himself glowering. "I won't tolerate flirtations with my wife."

"Whoa!" Thorne held up his hands. "You're not married yet."

"But you'd do well to think of her as my wife, as I already do." Guy folded his arms across his chest. He'd dreamed of her for years. It was still too wonderful to believe, and he wouldn't let Thorne or Yelverton or any man steal her away.

"Lady Octavia is like a sister to me, genuinely. I've never sought to court her, and she insists on trying to help me wed...someone else. Save your scowl for treaty negotiations." Thorne leaned forward in his chair. "I don't have any designs on your wife-to-be."

Guy narrowed his gaze at Rushworth.

"You know where my heart lies, and it's not with any woman in France," Rushworth said. "But since my advances toward Isabella are as unwelcome as Thorne's toward—"

Thorne shot him a quick glance.

"Let's just say that I'm eager to stay on the Continent, away from London Society." Rushworth looked apologetically at Thorne.

"Come now," Guy said. "If I can marry, surely you three can. It's not as hopeless as that, for any of you." He scanned their faces. He hadn't believed any of his friends, either, when they were the happy ones, and he was miserably lonely. His undersecretaries needed a distraction. *Work*. "What have you got for me?"

Yelverton pushed a sheaf of papers toward the duke. "Key points of the asylum bill."

Thorne slid another set of papers across the table. "Update on the Nationalist movement in Italy."

Rushworth handed him a thick stack of crisp sheets of papers. "The updated defense plan in case of a French invasion."

Guy regarded his undersecretaries, hooked his hands behind his

head, and leaned back in his chair. "I'm glad you've decided to stay. I can use your help."

# Chapter 19

Octavia hardly heard a word the duchess said. Menus. Shrubbery. Gravel. Pastry. Pudding. Wallpaper. Rugs. Hiring more footmen. The duchess was “Her Grace,” but that would be Octavia’s title after marriage. Or was she Guy’s mother? Would they call each other “Your Grace?” It would get very confusing. But now she had missed the entire conversation about the Easter dinner. “What should I call you?” she blurted out.

Her Grace blinked her eyes. “Oh.” She shifted on the sofa. Octavia had always felt painfully aware of her slight stature, and she barely came to Guy’s shoulder, but she and Guy’s mother were nearly the same height. The petite duchess studied her. “What would you *like* to call me? You already have a mother. You don’t need another.”

Octavia rearranged the pillows. Blue, gold, blue, gold. “But I *shall* call you ‘Mother,’ just like Guy. I have one ‘Mama,’ but I don’t have a ‘Mother.’”

Mother’s eyes misted over. She reached a hand toward Octavia. “I should like that very much. You feel like my own daughter already. I’ve watched you grow up and heard your mother worry about you for years.”

“It’s felt quite like having two mothers all along.” Octavia squeezed Mother’s hand. “But you know me well enough to know that I wasn’t listening to a word you were saying, since I was worried about what to call you. I’m so sorry. Will you start over again? Back at the part about the pastries and the hedges.”

Mother laughed. “The head gardener would like to meet with us about pruning the hedges before the Easter dinner.”

“Easter!” Octavia gasped.

“And the head cook would like her menu approved. We will go over each course. I anticipate sixty to eighty guests.”

Octavia rested back on her sofa as she began to contemplate her favorite dishes. But what should she ask the cook to serve? Her own preferences didn’t matter. She had to impress the guests.

Guy’s mother was still talking. “Then the architect wishes to

walk through the embassy room by room to examine the layout, wallpaper, and décor. The Crown requires a thorough update of the embassy. It may take a year or two to design and implement the changes.”

“Have you renovated any rooms before?” Octavia asked.

Mother nodded gently. It was hard to detect any enthusiasm in the soft, gentle tones, but Octavia knew her well enough to hear the pride in her voice. “We will have so many choices to make, and each of them is vital. We must make this embassy almost a second palace for the king and queen when they visit, and an intimidating place for the diplomats from other countries.” She dropped her voice even lower, and the reverence and awe were apparent in her tone. “There’s a throne room, and we get to select the fabrics and drapery for the queen herself.”

Octavia made a mental list of the new duties expected of her. *Host visits from the queen.* This was so much more than running an earl’s household, like Mama did.

“And the head of staff should have you inspect the linens, candlesticks, candle inventory, silverware, and vases. I always choose the table decorations myself.”

Octavia nodded.

“You’ll need a permanent maid who is willing to live in France. And your mama must decide how long to stay.”

*Mama leave?* They’d never left each other. *Ever.*

“Then you and I and she can plan the wedding. Will it be in England or in France?”

Octavia had lost track of everything she was supposed to do. “I don’t know. I’ll ask Guy.”

Mother shook her head. “You must not bother him with details. Simply tell him what’s happening, and he’ll do it. I never troubled his father with decisions I could make.”

But Octavia would rather plan things together with Guy.

“And what shall I call you?”

Octavia glanced up. Guy’s mother, who seemed as regal as Queen Victoria herself, was shyly scrutinizing her. Her intelligent eyes were oddly vulnerable.

“Please call me ‘daughter,’ or ‘Octavia.’”

The mist in Mother’s eyes became a waterfall. “I tried to have another child after my son. Pregnancy after pregnancy ended quickly and without another child.” Her eyes were lost in memories

for a moment, then she shook herself. "And Guy has waited so long for you to become a woman, ready to marry."

Octavia's heart burst with sunlight. "Do you really think so? This all feels rather sudden."

Mother wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. Her laugh was shaky. "Have you only just noticed him this last week?"

Octavia laughed. "Of course not. I've been waiting for *him* to notice *me* these two years at least."

Mother's laugh was the richest and loudest Octavia had ever heard. "Rest here on this sofa, daughter, and I'll send the staff in to see you."

The muscles in Octavia's cheeks hurt from smiling. She'd perfected her false smile during the Season, but she'd been able to rest the smile between dances and conversations. Here, the discussion of minute detail was endless. And in French. And *boring*.

"Select whichever linens are the finest. Why would you use anything else?" She interrupted the head butler. "You can make the decision without me."

The butler raised his chin in the air, and Octavia hid a smile. "*Oui*. I can, but Her Grace has been most particular."

"I am not. The table you set has dazzled me at every dinner. Is there any reason I must select the silverware when you are so capable?"

"No," the butler said. His chin rose higher. "But it is not my place."

"Very well. If I stop by tomorrow and select centerpieces and linens for Easter dinner, will you select the others for day-to-day dinners?"

Octavia could detect a hint of pride in his demeanor. "Of course."

"And you can work with the gardener on the flower arrangements. The gardener will select flowers that are in bloom—"

The butler scoffed. "He does not know which linens I am using."

"—and you always have the hothouse. Use whichever vase fits the flowers."

The butler's mouth opened incredulously. "You do not care?"

"Of course I care, but you have excellent taste." Octavia would rather spend time alone in the alcove with Guy than selecting flowers in the hothouse. Unless the hothouse had a few hidden

corners...

"Mademoiselle?" The butler called her attention back to himself.

"The flowers have always looked beautiful. I will select flowers for Easter, and you select the others. I trust your judgment." Octavia checked the list Mother had drawn up. "Is there anything else...Arnaud?" She hoped she had remembered his name.

"No." He bowed sternly. "My table settings will make you proud."

"Thank you." Octavia dimpled a smile, even though her cheeks ached.

The head butler left, and Octavia slumped on the sofa. Finally. What a long day.

She scratched him off the list. Why was everyone so surprised that she wanted them to choose for themselves? A vague queasiness formed in the pit of her stomach. Was it wrong to trust her staff to make their own decisions?

It seemed absurd to ask her which flavor of custard to serve, or which sauce. She wasn't a chef. Let the cooks decide which meal to serve. She cared about the Easter menu, but not about the others.

And the architect wanted to meet to decide the wallpaper and furnishings for every room in the embassy. Octavia groaned. The spring weather called her. An entire day without a walk outside, and the breezes were perfect this time of year.

Clara entered the room. "May I join you?"

Octavia straightened on her sofa and plastered on her cheek-splitting smile. "I'm delighted to see you."

"It doesn't sound like it." Clara chose a chair directly across from her. "How do you feel?"

"I will be better in no time," Octavia lied. She probably shouldn't walk outside, even if she had time for it. "How was your day?"

"Soul-crushingly boring," Clara said. "I must say that if your engagement takes you away from me like this every day, I shall be forced to brave the streets of Paris."

Octavia sighed. "I am sorry to report that the architect wishes to meet with me tomorrow."

"All day?" Lady Clara asked, and Octavia nodded.

Thorne, Yelverton, and Rushworth entered the room. "We've come to pay our respects," Rushworth said. Yelverton hung back, and Thorne seemed eager to avoid Clara.



Octavia knew there might be some hurt feelings, and she wished she could speak alone with Yelverton. "Have you seen Pharaoh's new litter of puppies? All the animals seem to be giving birth right now, but hers are the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. She's such a natural—won't leave the pups or anything."

Thorne laughed. "The last thing Clara wants to see is a dog, especially a Great Dane."

Clara turned and noticed him in the doorway. "Reggie. What are you implying?"

Thorne lounged against the doorjamb. "Nothing."

Clara rose from her seat so swiftly that her skirt rocked back and forth from the movement. "Will you never let me live it down?"

"It was Christmas Day," Thorne said. "Do you honestly think I would let any harm come to you in my home during Christmas dinner?"

"Your dog was chasing me. He's a monster."

"He likes you."

Clara crossed the room in quick strides, one hand on her hip. "He had his teeth bared."

"He was trying to lick your hand."

"He's nearly as tall as I am."

Rushworth and Yelverton snickered.

"I take it you know his dog?" Octavia asked.

"Wouldn't hurt a flea," Rushworth said.

Clara's voice went up an octave. She reached the space in front of Thorne and crossed her arms. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. "How was I to know?"

Thorne didn't flinch, but even from her seat on the sofa, Octavia could see the heat in his eyes. "I told you I would never let any harm come to you, and I never will."

They locked eyes. The warmth from his stare transferred to her cheeks, which flamed bright red now. Octavia wondered if any mistletoe had been involved in that conversation.

Thorne continued to lounge against the doorjamb while he inspected his fingernails. "Certainly, no reason to run into the dining room screaming and throw the Christmas pudding all over my finest suit."

Clara huffed. "I didn't throw it."

"Smashed into his face?" Rushworth offered. "Sounds glorious."

"Wish I'd seen it," Yelverton agreed.

Clara bit her lower lip. "It was more like a collision between Reggie, me, and the platter. It was all over my dress."

"And my face and your arms. Best day of my dog's life. Titan began to lick the pudding from Clara's hand, and you should have heard her scream then." Thorne quirked a half-smile. "I think they heard it across the waves in America."

"Titan is a nuisance," Clara said. Her lips were quivering, as though holding back a laugh.

"And yet, he adores you," Thorne said. "Always has."

Octavia wished she could hang a sprig of mistletoe above them in the doorway. "Yes, I see how unafraid of dogs you are. Pharaoh's puppies are certain to be your favorites."

Clara shuddered.

Thorne turned to leave. "I should like to see the beautiful creatures at any rate. I've missed Titan." He paused, then glanced back at Lady Clara, as if he couldn't help himself. "There's also a litter of kittens. If you'll brave Pharaoh's deadly brood of puppies, I might show you the ugly, scrawny, bawling kittens."

Clara squealed. "Really?"

Thorne shook his head. "She likes cats. I don't know why I am on speaking terms with her."

Clara threaded her arm through his. "Because you adore me, too, almost as much as Titan."

Thorne drew back his shoulders and straightened.

Octavia stifled a grin. He was fighting hard to act unaffected, but his casual manner didn't fool her.

"How can you like those animals?"

Clara's mouth curved in a slow smile. "We've been over this before."

Thorne glanced at Clara in disgust. "Cats are pointless."

But there was a glint in his blue-grey eyes. Clara had rarely teased him so openly before. She was almost flirting.

"Come, now. You promised me some adorable kittens." Clara gazed up at him, her mouth still set in a playful and inviting smile, and Thorne froze. The second-handsomest, second-most sought-after bachelor in London stood speechless for a split second, then he seemed to recover himself. He drew her close and led her out of the room, his shoulders pushed back and his tousled head held high.

"Puppies first, then the punishment afterward."

Octavia could hear them arguing as they exited the room to find

the stables. She met Rushworth's eyes, and she had to put a fist to her mouth to stifle her laughter.

"Kittens are hardly a punishment," echoed back from the hallway.

"What are they good for?"

"Hunting."

A choking sound.

"They can."

"Mice don't count." The voices grew softer as the footsteps faded.

"They catch small birds. Pheasants are birds. What's the difference?"

"You're impossible."

The sounds died away. Rushworth said, "Actually, I haven't seen the pups yet, either," and dashed after Thorne and Clara.

She was left with Yelverton. "He probably just wants to tease them."

Yelverton smiled weakly and wouldn't meet her eyes. He glanced toward the door.

"Before you go," Octavia said quickly, "please sit." She patted the cushion next to her.

Yelverton slowly perched himself on the thinnest edge of a chair across from her, the one that Lady Clara had vacated.

"I'm worried about you," Octavia said softly. "This conversation could be extremely uncomfortable, and I wish to say this quickly. Thank you for ever thinking highly enough of me to propose. I'm sorry that my heart had already been given to Guy. Well, I'm not sorry." She smiled at Yelverton, but his face was set.

"But I am sorry for the pain it may have caused you. I want you to find this same happiness, and I hope you'll forgive me for my friendly nature that misled you."

Yelverton swallowed and nodded. "It's not the first time I've been rejected."

Octavia leaned forward. "You mustn't think of it that way. It was a refusal, but I was deeply honored."

He smirked. "All of you have said that."

"Truly. I'm certain each woman meant it." Octavia sensed his hostility. "I think well of you, and I had no idea during the Season you believed our friendship was a courtship. I always knew, deep down, that I loved Guy. I cannot say how I might have felt, if I had

been unattached.”

He rose. “You’re right. This is uncomfortable.”

Octavia felt trapped by her knee and her wrist and her shoulder and their past. She couldn’t meet his gaze or convince him of her sincerity. “Yelverton. I’m going to be blunt, since no one else has troubled to help you.”

He faced the window.

“You’re a puppy, as much as one of Pharaoh’s litter out there. You mope around and sigh and read soppy love poems. It’s not helping you win women’s hearts, and you’re better than this.”

Yelverton turned back to face her, shock evident on his face.

“You’re a good man, but you’re spoiled, and you don’t apply yourself. I wake up hours before you do. I’m telling you right now that no woman will respect a husband who sleeps later than she does. You can either pull yourself together or pine away forever.”

Guy applauded from the doorway. “I hate to jump into a private conversation, but my wife is right.”

Warmth flooded her at the sound of his voice and the mention of the word “wife.”

Guy settled on the sofa next to her in the spot Yelverton had refused. He casually rested his fingers on her uninjured hand and played with the seams on her glove. “I think you’re a bit hard on him, though, Octavia.”

“What time did he eat breakfast this morning?” Octavia tilted her head up at Guy. His ice-blue eyes cut through her, and she forgot about Yelverton or anything else for a moment.

But Yelverton answered her question. “Ten-thirty. It’s true.” His rage seemed to turn to something worse. Self-pity. He was absolutely pathetic. “Everyone calls me a puppy. I don’t wish to be, but my mother has run the estates since I was three. I am spoiled. I’m a disgrace.”

Octavia and Guy exchanged a glance. “Guy will train you, but you have to start waking up earlier. Weren’t you going to row with Guy every morning?”

“Every morning?” Yelverton spluttered.

“Seven o’clock,” Guy said. “Every day. Rushworth and Thorne, too.”

“You’re serious.” Yelverton’s brow contracted. “Do I have to do this to become the deputy ambassador?”

“No,” Octavia said. She grinned at him. “You have to do that to

find a wife.”

## Chapter 20

The French ambassador had cancelled their meeting. Evidently, marriage wasn't nearly as respectable as having a mistress.

"You're reading too much into this," Octavia said as she studied the chess board. "It has nothing to do with our engagement. He's stalling for time, in case France decides to invade."

Guy scanned his remaining pieces. *He* needed to stall for time, or she would beat him again.

"He doesn't respect me." Guy moved his knight. "Did you read the invasion plan? I thought I left it in the top drawer, but now it's in the bottom drawer."

Octavia pondered his move. "He knows you're right, and he doesn't want to admit it. The attack was solely the work of Italian Separatists." She captured his knight. "They tried to force the emperor to support the Nationalist movement in Italy." She waved her hand. "Your top drawer is too easy to open. I have a few thoughts on how to improve the plan, by the way." She studied the chessboard.

*Blast.* Guy only had two moves left before he'd lose. "But the attack was planned in England. The bomb was constructed with parts made in England." He moved his pawn.

Octavia captured his pawn. "And the new asylum bill passed. What more do they want?"

Guy moved his queen. "An apology."

She moved her queen. "Which we gave."

He moved his queen back. "My first-born child."

Octavia's hand hovered between a rook and a pawn. "Who are you? Rumpelstiltskin? No one wants our unborn child."

Mother chose that moment to enter the library. "Your unborn child? Is there a reason for this hasty engagement?"

Octavia's cheeks flushed red. She moved the rook without looking at the board.

Guy's queen captured the rook. "Not that reason. Check."

Octavia advanced the pawn. "Checkmate." She yawned.

*Blast again.* It was a trap. She hadn't been distracted. She'd been

feinting, the clever girl. He grinned slowly at her. He would never admit that he loved losing to her, just to watch her brilliant mind at work.

Mother glanced between them.

"We were discussing diplomatic demands, Mother. I exaggerated. Octavia is not carrying my child yet."

"What?" Lady Shelford entered the room, clutching at her chest. "Octavia is carrying your child?"

"Keep your voice down, Mama," Octavia said. "He said NOT. I am NOT."

"Is it a possibility? Is there a reason for this conversation? Why was this engagement rushed?"

"Yet? Not yet?" Mother repeated. "When is the wedding? I have waited long enough for grandchildren."

"Honestly," Octavia said. "We better not have children for ten years, or I'll hear this the rest of my life. Is this what everyone believes? That's why we are engaged so soon?"

Guy should have considered that before proposing, but all he thought about was the feel of Octavia in his arms as he carried her and the need to always be near her side and the burning desire to lessen her pain and protect her. He clenched a fist. "Let them talk. I dare anyone to say it to my face."

Lady Shelford settled herself on a chair beside him and examined the chess board. "Oh, they'll talk, but it will be behind your back. Octavia will hear the snide whispers, not you." She looked at her daughter. "Did you use the strategy from the *Illustrated London News*?"

Octavia put a finger on her lips. "Don't give any secrets away, Mama." But she grinned at him. No wonder she always stole the newspaper before he could read it.

"What else are people saying?" Guy asked.

"The Prouttos, you mean," Lady Shelford clarified. "You understand that their version of this engagement is the only one that London will hear."

Guy reset the chess pieces on the board. No need to leave it so bare. "Or mine, or Thorne's, or any number of other people's."

Mother came over and laid her hand lightly on his shoulder. "They will return before any of us will, and they will have a far more colorful perspective."

He gritted his teeth. "I will not have my wife endure constant

gossip from the likes of those. I've tried to be diplomatic."

Mother's hand squeezed his shoulder. "You also kissed Octavia in full view of the Prouttons and everyone else at the Louvre exhibit."

"I didn't think they saw," Guy muttered.

"And your behavior has been suggestive," Lady Shelford said. "I won't even ask about any other times or what else anyone has seen."

"Good, because I won't explain. Suffice it to say, there's no reason to believe that Octavia is expecting a child."

Lady Proutton entered the library. "Lady Octavia is expecting a child?"

Guy straightened. "She is NOT. There's no reason to believe that. We have not—" He shook his head. This was getting worse. "Is there anyone else in the hallway, waiting to enter at the wrong time?"

Lady Proutton glared at him. "I don't know what you mean."

Guy took a deep breath. "I apologize. We were engaging in a light-hearted bit of teasing about Rumpelstiltskin, and the joke has been misunderstood." He smiled his most charming smile at Lady Proutton. Years of misery for Octavia were on the line. How angry and disappointed did the Prouttons feel, because their daughter was still unmarried at twenty-two and seventeen-year-old Octavia was engaged to a duke?

He added a measure of haughtiness to his smile. "Lady Clara is such a dear friend to Octavia. I am so glad you've been able to stay with us so long." She might benefit from a reminder that her stay at the embassy was entirely dependent on his good will, and that her daughter's social rank benefitted from her friendship with his wife. Wife-to-be, technically.

She could infer the silent warning behind his words as well.

Guy continued. "And I'm so glad we've had the company of Lord Yelverton, Mr. Thorne, and Mr. Rushworth. I must say, I'm more and more impressed by them each day. They're indispensable aides to me. I intend to recommend they stay as long as possible in my next missive to the Foreign Office and the queen."

Lady Proutton was savvy. She responded with a tight smile. "Yes. Mr. Thorne is an *old, dear* friend of our family, and Lord Yelverton. You know. Nobility."

Guy waited.



“And Mr. Rushworth. Yes. So pleased to get to know him better during our stay.”

Guy put on a thoughtful air. “It might almost be safe for you to return home for Easter. Lord Prouton must be eager to attend Parliament, where he and I have so many mutual friends. I know I am anxious to share my happy news about my engagement to *my* old, dear friends. Everyone must be curious to hear the story.”

Lady Prouton understood him. If any hint of scandal about Octavia reached him, if any shadow tainted his engagement, he would hold her responsible. Lady Prouton’s smile tightened even further, and her shrewd eyes narrowed. “We are delighted to share Easter with you, Your Grace, if you’ll allow us to remain another week or two.”

Guy flicked a casual glance at Octavia. “Dear? Would you like Lady Clara to stay here longer? Is there space in the embassy?”

Octavia nodded regally. *Dear girl*. She understood what he was doing. He loved the way she could read his thoughts with one glance.

“Mother?”

She nodded as well. “Octavia makes all the arrangements now.”

He inclined his head slightly. “It would be *our* pleasure if you would be *our* guests for Easter.” He emphasized “our,” so there would be no mistake. As far as he was concerned, Octavia was already his duchess and a part of the family, and the Proutons had better understand that he would tolerate no gossip about her.

Even if she was wildly unpredictable.

Lady Prouton exited the room. Mother and Lady Shelford exchanged a glance. “No need for concern,” Mother said.

“She understood you perfectly.” Lady Shelford smiled at him.

Guy relaxed. “I haven’t finished that book on Egypt. Perhaps I’ll read myself to sleep tonight.”

“Not another game of chess?” Octavia asked.

It was tempting, but he couldn’t trust himself around her. Even with both of their mothers sitting in the room. He had to take precautions and avoid rumors until they were married.

He allowed himself just one moment to hold her hand. “Not tonight. I concede.”

Her mother nodded approvingly in his direction, and Octavia rewarded him with a dazzling smile.

He could only take so much of his fiancée’s beauty. He forced

himself to drop her hand and leave his chair. "Have you set a date for the wedding?"

"We only got engaged yesterday. Have you sent a telegram to Percy to ask his formal permission? It'll take months to write a marriage contract."

*Months.*

"Don't scowl at me," Octavia said. "I'd marry you tomorrow, if it were my choice. I could sign the register with my right hand, even if my left wrist is sprained. You could carry me down the aisle, since my knee still hurts." The sparkle in her eyes flared back to life. "You could carry me everywhere."

He raised her fingers to his lips. "Shall I help you back to your room?" He grinned wickedly. "In the same manner as I did last night?"

Octavia bit her lip, then returned his grin.

Lady Shelford and Mother immediately left their seats. "No. We will help her back to her chambers. And it's *not* up to you, Octavia," Lady Shelford said. "You cannot marry a day after you get engaged."

"Tomorrow would be two days," Octavia said. "Not one."

"One day or two, that would start rumors in earnest," Mother said. "Send that telegram to Shelford tomorrow, son."

Guy kissed Octavia's hand slowly and held it to his chest. "Once again, I concede. Good night, Octavia. Mother. Lady Shelford." But he couldn't move. Octavia's eyes trapped him in their emerald beauty.

She leaned in until they were an inch apart and a hint of violets delicately drifted around her. She lowered her voice so softly that neither mother would hear her. "Why did I kiss you more often before we were engaged than after?"

Guy ran a hand over her silky hair, perfectly smooth tonight, and returned her whisper. "I'd like to remedy that as soon as possible."

Lady Shelford cleared her throat. "Get those lawyers working overtime," she said with a suspicious glare. "They're going to need to write the quickest marriage contract in the history of settlements."

# Chapter 21

Guy hadn't had a chance to redeem his promise to Octavia yet, and it was already Easter Sunday. The Proutttons were still at the embassy, with no indication that they intended to participate in the London Season any time soon.

There were too many people and not enough chances to kiss his wife-to-be. Lady Shelford and Mother were tutoring Octavia in the finer points of running a household, and they weren't inclined to leave him alone with his fiancée for even a second.

He couldn't even sit beside her during dinners anymore. He had to entertain the French ambassador's wife, since Octavia had convinced the couple to join them for Easter dinner, and she had promised to seat the ambassador with herself and Estelle at the far end of the impossibly long table.

Meanwhile, Mother would occupy her usual position, since he and Octavia were not married yet. He did not understand how to pair eighty dinner partners with their social rank and precedence, nor did he care.

"But I've spent hours matching the pairs and learning about each guest and speaking with the gardener and chef and—" Octavia stopped. "Are you proud of me? Are you even listening?"

Guy wished he could show his appreciation in a tangible way, especially since her latest dress accentuated the curve of her waist in a highly distracting manner, but their mothers were both watching. His gaze dropped down to her, and heat blazed in his eyes. "I have the smartest wife in England."

But Octavia's smile faltered. "High praise indeed. We're not married yet, and we live in France."

It was as if wind extinguished the flame. Before he could try to explain himself or reassure her, the guests arrived, and Guy had to greet them one at-a-tedious-time. Octavia whispered names and positions before each couple approached him, and he had to fight the fire that blazed each time her breath drifted across his neck.

He didn't have time to thank her, either, or tell her how much he appreciated the new, flavorful tea blend she'd ordered or how

much lighter his workload had become now that he didn't have to talk about curtains with his mother or how much better his life was because she was in it. The French ambassador's beautiful, but dangerously curious, wife needed to be escorted to the endlessly long dining table.

Everything was precisely the way he and Mother liked Easter dinner. His favorite soup and fish. Roast pork, pastry-wrapped quail for each person with a meat gravy on a delectable plate of watercress, sea kale with a melted butter sauce, Jerusalem artichokes and Brussel sprouts arranged neatly on mashed potatoes to resemble a chessboard, a separate cheese course, and dessert. Fresh fruit and nuts, ices, orange wafers to dip into a wine from a vineyard nearby, a citrus soufflé, and an apple hedgehog shaped like the animal with meringue and almonds to complete the effect.

And Mother's favorite Easter lilies were displayed in the centerpieces. He tried to catch Octavia's eye to applaud her choice, but she was too busily engaged in her flamboyant happiness. Her tinkling laughter carried all the way down the table to him, like splashes of sound carried on the breeze of conversation.

And yet, something was wrong. He pretended to listen to the French ambassador's wife and scanned the room. Yelverton had claimed Lady Clara, who was unaccountably flirtatious. Thorne was likewise engaged in friendly banter with an attractive young heiress passing through on Grand Tour. Rushworth was arguing about slavery in the Caribbean with a French businessman.

Nothing to account for Octavia's distress in that, unless she was annoyed with Thorne for neglecting Lady Clara, but Yelverton was more than attentive enough to make it up to her friend. Lady Shelford seemed content to argue philosophy with an aged French statesman. Indeed, they were getting along rather well. Was that it? Was she concerned her mother would remarry?

He smiled vaguely at his dinner partner's conversation and tried to watch Octavia out of the corner of his eye. No, she hadn't glanced once in her mother's direction. He couldn't account for her over-the-top cheerfulness.

Unless she was angry with him.

Nothing he could do right now. He suffered through a long discourse on the difficulties of grooming poodles, then tried to entertain the dinner partner on his other side. She was no better. Octavia had seated another government official's wife by him, and

she did not wish to talk to him, Easter or not. Evidently, she had not forgiven England for their role in the January attack on their emperor.

So, they discussed the weather and a whole host of superficial topics in sullen and impassive conversation. He tried to win her over, but she refused to give anything but monosyllabic answers. It was the longest dinner of his life.

Octavia's frantic delight and unusually frequent laughter rang out along the table, while his dinner partners pointedly ignored him and explained how to clip a poodle's toenails in excruciating detail.

*I'm a diplomat*, he reminded himself. *This is what I do*. Listen to them. Learn about their lives. Build connections and trust and relationships, even if it's comparing notes about how to groom a Great Dane instead of a tiny ball of fluff.

But dinner turned out to be as tedious as reading lengthy missives and daily updates. At least Octavia had ordered his favorite foods and ensured Mother would have her traditional lilies.

At last, the dinner ended, and he could mingle with other guests, which meant more tedious conversation. At least there was some variety. Some of the guests preferred to talk about their bulldogs or terriers instead of their poodles.

The guests eventually left, and Guy was the last one in the deserted dining room. He nodded to the butler, and the staff began to clear the dessert course and table settings. He walked past wine-stained tablecloths, dropped napkins trodden by muddy boots, candelabras covered in tiny drips of wax, and gravy spills stuck to the floor with apricot pastry crumbs. At least the flowers hadn't wilted.

This was what Octavia dealt with every day while he tried to make peace with France.

He left to find her. Perhaps she had slipped into the Blue Room. Her knee had recovered in the last two weeks, and she was able to walk on her own now, unfortunately.

As soon as he entered, he had to stifle a groan. Lady Clara, his three undersecretaries, and his two mothers were all perched on chairs and sofas. Octavia sat ensconced in the middle, chattering away. He silently joined her, so he wouldn't disturb the story.

"—and she never heard from the scoundrel again." Everyone laughed, and Octavia aimed a blinding smile at him. "Guy! Is the dinner over at last?"

He nodded. The air in the room changed. The smiles faded. Lady Clara glanced at the clock in the corner. Lady Shelford sighed. "Is it that late?"

"I'd better get some sleep, if I'm going to be rowing in the morning," Yelverton said, with a glance toward Guy. Rushworth left his chair to join him. Thorne glanced at Lady Clara, then folded his arms across his chest.

Lady Clara eyed the men. "I suppose I should retire as well."

Awkwardness filled the silence as no one offered to escort her. Yelverton and Thorne stared at each other, engaged in some unspoken battle. Thorne glared at Yelverton, who returned his gaze defiantly. Finally, the fight seemed to leave Yelverton, and he shrugged.

Thorne swiveled his attention to Lady Clara. His jaw was set, and his eyes were fierce. "May I see you to your room?"

"Don't be a martyr, Reggie." Lady Clara's usually friendly tone was clipped. "Yelverton can escort me."

"I don't mind," Thorne said. A vein pulsed in his neck.

Lady Clara pursed her lips. "I do." She glanced over at Yelverton, who avoided her gaze and did not offer to escort her.

The awkwardness intensified as a palpable tension filled the room.

Octavia laughed lightly, and the gentle sound was like water trickling over pebbles in a stream. The tension vanished with her smile. "You're not still upset that he forced you to visit the puppies? You've bickered for weeks. What happened between you in the stables?" She grinned at them. "It's nice and private back there."

Lady Clara flushed. "Nothing happened."

Octavia looked between Lady Clara and Thorne. "Then why are you arguing?" It was so straight-forward and so sincere that it would be hard to take offense at her sweet tone of voice and gentle smile.

And yet.

How could she ask that question? It was completely inappropriate to interfere and put them on the spot.

"I'm not the one holding the grudge," Lady Clara said coolly.

Thorne looked like he might break a tooth. The playfulness had gone from his demeanor. "I'm not the one lying."

Mother and Lady Shelford rose. "Perhaps we'll call it a night," Lady Shelford said tactfully, and the two friends left the room.

“Time for a chat,” Octavia said, her grin widening. “No one is going anywhere until I hear the details.”

Thorne shifted in his chair. Octavia leaned toward him and gestured to Lady Clara, who refused to budge. Octavia dropped her voice. “Exactly what happened in the stables? It’s been two weeks, and you’ve been avoiding each other ever since. This ends tonight. It’s Easter Sunday, and you’re going to forgive each other.” Octavia’s charming intensity left no room for argument.

So, Thorne and Lady Clara remained silent.

“I will hazard a guess,” Octavia said. “Lady Clara was so overcome with tender sentiments when she saw the litter of kittens that she finally gave way to her feelings—”

“That’s enough,” Lady Clara interrupted. She seated herself, as if resigned to the conversation at last.

Octavia glanced around the room. Her voice barely floated above a whisper. “Your parents aren’t here, and Guy’s not going to force Thorne to marry you, simply because you kissed him. He could, as head of the embassy, but he won’t.”

Guy shifted on the sofa beside her. How could she speak on his behalf and say such outrageous things? He had to support her now that she had committed him. What sorts of things might she have told the French ambassador during dinner? What had she told Estelle?

Thorne choked. “What makes you think that *she* kissed *me*?” He puffed out his chest. “Usually the man—”

Octavia smoothed her dress. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Again, Thorne and Lady Clara remained silent.

“She is flirting with Yelverton, and you are flirting with anyone who will speak to you. That tells me enough.” Octavia tapped her foot on the floor. Her knee bounced up and down. Guy had to fight an urge to put his hand on her knee.

“So, Clara, you need to sort out your feelings for your old friend and stop listening to your parents. Thorne.” Octavia sighed. “Don’t flirt with one person when you’re secretly in love with someone else.”

He stared at her.

“It’s not fair. Ask Yelverton how it feels.”

Octavia shooed them away. “Go, walk her to her door, Thorne, and both of you stop sulking. It was just one kiss, or two or three, but nothing to end your friendship over. Take your time, if you

must, but don't break Yelverton's heart again in the process. He can't take it, Clara, and he deserves better."

Thorne reluctantly held out his arm to Lady Clara. "The duchess gave us orders." His joke fell flat in the tension-filled room.

Lady Clara rose from her seat and looked around the room until her eyes locked with Yelverton's. "I'm sorry, Lord Yelverton. I wasn't myself tonight."

He smiled at her ironically. "Another arrow misses its mark."

Thorne drew her arm through his stiffly. "May I accompany you all the way across the dark and dangerous embassy?"

"As long as there are no dogs," Lady Clara said, with a hint of a smile. Her brow knit together. "Am I the person you're flirting with or the person you're secretly in love with?"

Thorne stared straight ahead. "I'm not sure I'm ready to answer that," he said and ran a hand through his already-tousled hair.

Lady Clara's eyes were drawn up to it, and she searched his face.

His jaw was set again. "Not here," Thorne said. They left the room together, and Guy strained to hear a word of conversation, but it was completely quiet.

"Sorry, mate," Guy said to Yelverton. "Lady Clara might throw him over yet. You have a title, after all."

Yelverton's stiff posture didn't match his casual denial. "It only lasted a day or two. At least I didn't propose this time." He winked at Octavia, whose small gust of laughter sounded forced to Guy.

At least the puppy had a sense of humor. There was hope for him yet. Yelverton and Rushworth left the room arguing whether pheasant or quail was the superior bird for a dinner.

Guy reluctantly left the comfortable sofa and offered his arm to Octavia. "I'm sure your mother and mine are waiting at your door with a stopwatch."

"And dueling pistols," Octavia said, but there was no laughter behind her eyes anymore. She slipped her arm into his, and he felt her weariness. It was as if a heaviness had descended on her as soon as the others left.

He led her out of the Blue Room, and she walked by his side without any of her usual liveliness. The corridors echoed with the stillness of evening, and the vast space felt intimate. "What's wrong?" Guy asked quietly.

Octavia shook her head. "I'm merely tired. What's on your mind? Something's upset you."



He hesitated. "No, it hasn't."

She stopped at the bottom of the grand staircase. "Then why are you glowering at me?"

"I'm not," Guy said, and attempted to un-glower his face. He tried to smile convincingly, but he couldn't erase his lingering sense of unease.

Octavia traced a finger along his brow. "Why are there creases on your forehead instead of laugh lines by your eyes? You're worried, and you don't want to tell me what's wrong."

He groaned. "How do you know me so well?"

Her smile felt like an apology. "I love you, Guy. You can tell me your concerns."

He darted a glance at her waist and shoulders as he led her up the stairs. "I love you, too, darling. Your dress is exquisite tonight."

"Thank you." Octavia dimpled a smile. "And? What else?" She tilted her head to one side.

He studied the smooth marble stairs as they climbed. He was trying to comfort her, but she wouldn't tell him her worries. She expected him to add to her concerns. "And it's been a long night filled with tedious conversation, and I've missed talking to you."

Octavia put a hand on his chest. She climbed a step ahead of him, so that she was nearly level with him. Her eyes burned with a challenge, and it took all his restraint not to kiss her there in the open. "Will you always keep secrets from me when we are married?"

Guy met the challenge in her gaze, but he dreaded to hurt her. He brushed the curls away from her face and cupped her cheek. "First, I am concerned that *you* are anxious about something and will not tell me why."

Something flickered in Octavia's eyes, and he knew she was keeping secrets, too.

But Guy said the uncomfortable truth, even if she would not tell him hers. "And a duchess would not talk to Thorne and Lady Clara so candidly."

She brushed his hand away.

She had asked for the truth, and she would hear it, even if it hurt. Perhaps if he was completely honest with her, she would be equally sincere.

"She must be above politics and gossip. She cannot be the person *starting* the rumors."

Again, a wave of worry washed across her face before a mask fell into place.

"Funny." Octavia yawned and stretched. "I thought I'd be in the middle of it more than ever." She tipped her head onto his shoulder, so that they were nearly embracing.

"You really shouldn't—" Guy started.

"Don't you like being near me?" Octavia interrupted.

Guy nudged her off his shoulder before he did anything else he regretted, then continued up the rest of the staircase. "I love it. Too much. We are the standard everyone looks up to. We set the example for Society. You are second only to the queen in Society. You must conduct yourself formally now."

Octavia straightened. "Even in an empty corridor in the middle of the night after an exhausting Easter dinner when the staff did nothing I asked them to do?"

Guy shot a glance at her. Her blasted chin was wobbling. "The dinner was perfect. It was exactly the way I like it with all my favorite dishes and my mother's favorite flowers."

"But none of mine," Octavia whispered.

A marble-lined hallway curved to one side, and Thorne and Lady Clara had disappeared around the corner long ago. "What do you mean?" Guy asked.

"I only asked for a few things, and none of them happened," Octavia said, with a quiver in her voice. "I don't understand. And they've switched back to that awful tea blend again. You missed the afternoon tea today, but it was horrible."

"Who?" he demanded.

Octavia smoothed his brow again and traced a feather-light line down his cheek. "Never mind. You have enough to worry about, and I will handle things. Wasn't it a lovely dinner?" She plastered on a huge smile for him. "I'm so glad *you* had the dishes you enjoy."

Octavia was lying. He tugged her toward him and wrapped an arm around her waist. She melted into him, and he searched her troubled eyes. "I always know when something upsets you. Please tell me."

But the moment of honesty had passed, and she had retreated into her shell again.

She balanced on her tiptoes and laid a hand on his cheek. "I've missed you. That's all." She traced a line down and along the edge of his jaw.

“You aren’t happy,” he said, trying hard to keep his mind on her needs instead of the kiss he wanted so desperately.

Octavia ran her fingers up his neck and into his hair. The line between her needs and his wants was blurring. “How can I be happy when I hardly see you?”

Guy drew her close. “I’ve started the marriage settlement, but it’s hard to correspond overseas by telegram. It’ll take longer than usual.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and sank into his embrace. “Thank you. I’m happy right now.”

Footsteps rang along the corridor, and he nudged her head off his shoulder again. He quickly lifted her chin to his and pressed a kiss to her lips. She responded eagerly, and the kiss was beginning to get interesting when the approaching footsteps broke through his awareness. He pushed the sound away and allowed himself one more moment to explore where this kiss might go.

He was taking too much of a risk, but her lips called to him. Octavia held him spellbound, and even the threat of discovery didn’t penetrate the building heat in his chest. Octavia’s fingers skated across the back of his neck and along his collar, and Guy moved his hands further up her back.

A loud snort broke them apart, and Octavia pushed Guy away. He stumbled, then righted himself with as much dignity as a duke caught kissing his fiancée could muster.

Thorne grinned in the corridor. “Sorry, Woodford. My apologies. I should have walked a different way.”

Guy scrubbed a hand over his face. “Of course not. You can’t traverse the entire embassy to avoid us.”

Octavia patted her hair, smoothed her dress, and grinned at Thorne. “Have you sorted anything out? You can see that His Grace and I are still on excellent terms.” She eyed Guy’s collar, which had somehow worked loose.

Thorne smirked and reached up. His own collar was wrinkled, and his lapels were askew. “I’d say things are improving.” He winked and sauntered away.

Guy let out a deep breath.

“If Thorne is kissing Clara more often and more thoroughly than you’re kissing me, there’s a problem,” Octavia said, as her fingers tripped up his arm.

Guy trapped her hand and stopped its progress. He walked faster

until they reached the doorway leading to her bedchamber. Anyone might come out of a room at any moment and see them here. He could not chance kissing Octavia like that again until they were married. He glanced around. "Right. Lesson learned. Don't get engaged," he muttered.

Octavia's eyes widened. "I heard you. You never think I can hear you, but I always do." She withdrew her hand and stalked into her bedchamber, slamming the door behind her.

Guy kicked the wall in frustration. His toes stung immediately, and he limped away from her door. He hadn't meant it, and she should know that. Why was it that she couldn't laugh at his joke, but she could laugh when Yelverton winked? She was delighted with anything and everything and everyone else tonight. Why was she angry with *him*?

He should be furious with *her*. A duchess didn't ask a gentleman like Thorne whether he had just kissed a woman goodnight or ask a gentlewoman like Lady Clara whether she had kissed Thorne in the stables.

Guy closed his door more forcefully than he intended, and it bounced back from the frame. He was as temperamental as Octavia, slamming doors when he didn't get his way. He shut the door carefully until it clicked into place. He was in complete control of himself. Wasn't he?

No. A gentleman didn't kiss a woman in the corridor where Thorne could stumble across them. Even if Octavia shrugged it off, Guy could not forgive himself for humiliating her.

A sinking sense of dread crashed into him. All these years, he had warned himself away from her. He'd been afraid he'd lose control if he ever indulged his feelings for her. He had kept away from Octavia because she seemed too impulsive, too headstrong, too naive, and too immature to be his duchess.

What if she was?

And even worse, what if his engagement was making him just like her: reckless, impulsive, out of control, and unfit to attend to his duties?

## Chapter 22

Estelle's three children frolicked on the banks of the Seine. Octavia giggled as the youngest proudly brought her a white rock shot through with flecks of black from the sandy riverbank. It reminded her of Pharaoh's harlequin pattern, and she pocketed it. "They are charming," she told Estelle.

"Especially at that age," Estelle pointed to the youngest, who looked only five or six. "When they get older?" She shrugged and waved to the oldest, who scowled back at her.

"I see what you mean," Octavia said. "But I still say they are charming, all three of them."

Estelle pointed to her stomach. "And you will have one soon?"

Octavia laughed. "No, not until long after I marry."

Clara leaned forward on the wool blanket. "I'm so sorry if my parents have spread that rumor."

Estelle's eyes were full of mischief. "Do not trouble yourself. The walls have ears in an embassy. It was not your parents who whispered that to me."

"And you? Do you hope to have many children or a few?" Octavia asked Clara. She watched the river flowing over the rocks and thought of Guy. "I hear the rowing is going well each morning."

"Oh? And what does this have to do with children?" Estelle asked. One of the children raced over and spoke rapidly in French. Estelle handed the child a sandwich, then turned to Clara expectantly. "There are many handsome men at your embassy who like to row."

"No, it's nothing at all," Clara said.

Octavia grinned. "It could be something, if you'd listen to your feelings."

Clara picked at a blade of grass. "My parents only care about a title."

Octavia's grin faded. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm twenty-two," Clara said. "Legally, I could marry anyone I wanted to, but I have no wish to defy them."

“Ah,” Estelle said. “You are star-crossed lovers. So it was with me.” She waved her hand. “He married to please his parents, and here I am.” She shrugged.

Clara picked another blade of grass.

Octavia watched the children digging in the sandy bank of the river. “They don’t think so poorly of Thorne. Have you asked your parents if they would consider him?”

Clara shook her head. “Oh, no. I haven’t even considered him, since I know they won’t.”

Octavia raised an eyebrow. “Kissing him doesn’t count?”

“Not *really*. That’s why Reggie’s so furious with me.” The misery in Clara’s voice tugged at Octavia’s heart. “It’s even worse today than before.”

“That must have been quite a kiss last night,” Octavia said.

Clara blushed.

Octavia thought of Guy’s reprimand after Easter dinner. She shouldn’t have brought up the kiss. Should she even be having this conversation? But Clara was her friend, and she couldn’t help herself. “You won’t even ask your parents?” Octavia asked. “My mama is accustoming herself to the idea more and more each day.”

“My parents are not very understanding,” Clara said. “I would lose Reggie’s friendship, certainly, if I dared to hint at any interest to my parents. They would put a stop to our visits with his family and leave the embassy immediately.”

Estelle watched her children playing. “Sometimes I wonder what might have happened if Stephan had tried a little harder...” She smiled sadly. “But you must not love him, if you give up so easily.”

Clara threw the handful of loose grass into the breeze. “I haven’t thought about it.”

Octavia and Estelle exchanged a glance and a knowing smile. Octavia’s guilt increased. If Guy knew the kind of conversation she was having today, would he be angry? What would a duchess do right now?

Clara shaded her eyes and peered across the river. Octavia followed her gaze and studied the uneven rooftops and the bustle of carriages in the distance. Boats floated silently in the current, powerless to choose their own course. Clara sighed. “I *cannot* think about it, because what if I do love him? I will never be content with the man I am forced to marry.”

She rose from the blanket and dusted off her skirt. Octavia and

Estelle stood as well. A light breeze lifted their bonnets and tickled the ringlets around their cheeks. The children's play had turned to fighting. The oldest was pushing the youngest toward the river, and the youngest came running to Estelle.

"It must be hard to raise them alone," Clara said.

"Fighting all the time," Estelle replied.

"Like England and France," Octavia said. "Tell me how you solve your children's arguments, and I'll tell Guy how to end this conflict with France." She congratulated herself on her duchess-like remark. Nothing scandalous. No gossip.

Estelle threw back her head and laughed. "I make them talk to each other and apologize." She called to the eldest, who sulked his way over.

The children apologized angrily and hugged each other so tightly they might be wrestling again, then ran back to the banks of the river to play. "My queen and your emperor need someone to force them to talk to each other, as if they were children."

"It's a bit childish, isn't it?" Estelle said. "We know your country didn't plan the assassination, and you know England cannot harbor criminals who plan and carry out attacks on foreign soil."

Octavia nodded. "Wars could be prevented if the wives of the diplomats would sit down and have lunch together."

"And their husbands would listen to them," Clara said, laughing.

Pain flitted across Estelle's face.

"I'm sorry," Octavia said quickly. "I should have phrased that differently. 'Dearest loves,' not wives." Now she was gossiping again.

But she really did love talking with her friends, and Guy didn't understand how important it was. Women needed each other. It wasn't gossip. It was friendship.

Estelle glanced around the quiet riverbank. "Can you keep a secret? Only a few know."

Octavia and Clara drew closer.

"I want to inspire Lady Clara."

Octavia shivered with anticipation.

"I *am* Stephan's wife. We married secretly. That is why we have children, and he has none with his other 'wife.' She knows this, and she has an *amour* of her own. She and Stephan maintain the façade of a marriage for political gain. She is still jealous of me and desperate to keep her position as an ambassador's wife. She

understood when she entered this agreement that she will never have children, but she was ambitious enough to accept the sacrifice.”

Octavia met Estelle’s gaze and saw the pain lurking there.

“So, you see, we have lost almost everything because we were afraid,” Estelle said. “Our reputations. Living together as man and wife. The chance to raise our children together.” She paused to wipe a tear. “I only have my sacred vows with God to honor, and my beautiful children. You must ask yourself, *mon cherie*, how much you are willing to lose because of your fear, or what you might gain if you would risk something.”

Estelle gripped Clara’s hand on one side and Octavia’s hand on the other.

“I only tell *you*, because you are the first Englishwomen who have not turned up their noses at me, thinking I am Stephan’s mistress.”

Octavia squeezed her hand. “So, your husband knows I am not Guy’s mistress?”

Estelle’s eyes twinkled. “He enjoys teasing your duke and provoking him.”

Octavia laughed. “I like you too well to lose your friendship. We each follow God in our own way, and I am not here to judge you, just to love you.”

Estelle wiped her eyes.

Clara watched them thoughtfully.

Estelle threaded her arm through Octavia’s. “You inform your fiancé that he is to arrange a visit for the queen, and I’ll tell my husband to arrange a visit with the emperor.”

“And we’ll tell both of them to stop throwing tantrums like spoiled children,” Octavia said.

They walked down to the river’s edge. The slight breeze skimming the water cooled them. The children threw rocks, and Octavia watched the ripples undulate across the surface. One decision could change the fate of a nation. One conversation.

Gossip had a place in diplomacy, too.

“I’ll speak with him tonight,” she said.





\* \* \*

Guy didn't take the news well. "You arranged what? You agreed to what?" He spluttered and rubbed his forehead.

"Estelle and I—"

"You talked about this with her?" Guy probably didn't mean to glare, but his look was somewhere between impatient and furious, and his voice somewhere between annoyed and irate.

"We agreed that the heads of state should meet to show the good will of each country. It will do far more to improve the relations between countries than the bickering between you and the ambassador." Octavia folded her arms across her chest. She felt sick to her stomach at his obvious indignation, but she would never let Guy know.

"You expect me to invite the queen for a visit? Simply drop her a telegram and tell her the emperor would like to chat?"

Octavia raised her chin. No wobble. No crying. "Yes. I promised Estelle that you would, and Stephan will speak with the emperor."

Guy's brow knit in confusion. "Stephan?"

"The French ambassador. Your counterpart," Octavia said.

He rubbed his temples. "I have a headache."

Octavia moved behind him. She was his headache. She brought out the worst in him. The pain in the pit of her stomach intensified. She laid her hands on his hunched shoulders and began to rub the tension out of them.

He moaned and leaned his head against her. "I love you, but your idea is absurd." He glanced around. "There's no one in the library with us right now."

She paused, then continued rubbing his shoulders. "I love you, but I don't find you at all attractive when I'm angry with you."

Guy tried to turn his head, but she put her hands on either side of his face and straightened it.

"You don't want to kiss me?" The distress in his voice was interlaced with hurt and surprise. "We may not get another chance for a long time."

Octavia moved her hands up to his temples and tried to massage

away his worries. "You don't take my ideas seriously, and they are brilliant."

Guy's head relaxed. "You are smarter than me. I know that."

"You finally admit it." Octavia laughed. She rubbed small circles on each side of his head, then moved up to massage his scalp. "You may as well concede every future chess game now."

Guy was still awake enough to notice the jibe. "That I will not concede. I like watching you strategize too much." He slumped against her and sighed. "Why didn't I marry you sooner?"

"You haven't married me yet," Octavia said. She moved her fingers down to his neck and tried to work on the worry she could feel there. Had she caused that strain?

Guy muttered something that sounded like "Mmm-hmmm," and she thought he might fall asleep.

She gently pushed away from him, so she could leave the room. Guy drowsily rose from his chair and wrapped his arms around her waist before she had taken a step. "You know what? You *are* a brilliant strategist. I'll send a telegram right away and see what the queen says."

Octavia stared at him. He brushed a curl from the side of her face. The heat in his eyes was a different kind of smolder. It was a sleepy contentment that spoke of complete acceptance and unconditional love, but still burned. It startled her. He had been so angry before, and this new warmth shocked her. It also gave her a hope that filled the hollow pit in her stomach.

"I hate it when you're right," Guy said. "But I'd hate it even more if I didn't listen to you when you were right." His eyes were soft and apologetic.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and massaged the worry knots. "You're much more attractive now," Octavia said.

Guy's moan turned into a kiss that curled her toes, then weakened her knees, and then sent flutters dancing inside her stomach. When the tingles reached the top of her head, she pushed him away. She didn't want to explore what came next until they were married, because something powerful urged her on, now that his trust and respect and love were as alluring as his sky-blue eyes, pale blond hair, and strong shoulders.

Guy leaned his forehead against hers and drew a deep breath. "Slowing down again," he said, even though she hadn't said anything. His piercing eyes understood her.

Octavia nodded.

“I will go send that telegram right now,” he said, hugging her tight and turning them both toward the exit to leave the room. Guy kissed her one last time and left his office. He called back to her. “I married a genius.”

Octavia called back to him. “Not yet!”

## Chapter 23

Preparations for the queen's visit took all of Octavia's time. Lists of guests. Assigning bedchambers. Finding rooms for valets and lady's maids and the queen's entire entourage.

And planning meals for each day of her stay before the Versailles visit and after. And entertainment. And making sure the carriages were in order. Getting the paint reapplied to the royal crest on the finest carriages.

And the linens and the silverware and the Throne Room. Personally inspecting every room for a speck of dust.

And Guy's mother hovering at her shoulder, correcting her, and changing her decisions. "Yellow, I think, not orange. Isn't that what you meant?" "The dinner should be at eight o'clock, not seven-thirty. Right, Octavia?" "Oh, I'm certain Octavia wishes to have the violin quartet that evening. Don't you?"

She just pasted a smile on her face. No, she *didn't* like yellow. Orange would look much better. And everyone would be starving by seven-thirty. Why wait until eight o'clock to eat? And violins only? Why not a complete string quartet with cello and bass? She couldn't contradict the duchess in front of the staff. It was best to keep her opinions to herself.

Except when she spoke with the chef. "I gave you a specific menu for the first dinner. Just that meal."

He shrugged and handed her an éclair. "I know they are your favorite, and I made some just for you. I cannot help you. Her Grace said not to serve the French dishes to the queen. Only the English dishes."

"But the queen might like to try your best cooking while she's here," Octavia argued. "Let her see your finest."

The chef shook his head. "Her Grace said she wants familiar food, and I cannot disobey her."

"But I'm asking you—"

The chef's apologetic manner and cream-filled pastry made it a little easier to bear. "Her Grace gave me a menu. She is still the head of the household at the embassy. Some of her choices..." He

grimaced. "I like your menu better, but what can I do?"

Octavia drew a deep breath. "Very good. I'm sure your cooking will be as delicious as ever. Thank you for the dessert." She dimpled her kindest smile and left before he saw her frustration.

Octavia checked the list of room assignments with the head butler. "This is different than the list I gave you."

"I made some adjustments."

It looked as though he'd thrown out her list and started over entirely.

"Did Her Grace consult with you?"

He drew back in dismay. "No. But the sizes of the rooms and the views were entirely wrong. If I put the prince in that room..." He shuddered. "The duke would be humiliated."

Octavia didn't even try to argue with him. "Thank you for making those changes. I'm sure the guests will be more comfortable now. I'm glad you know the embassy so well."

She dreaded her next visit. The housekeeper had already changed the tea back to that awful blend. Would she listen to anything Octavia said?

She should have brought Guy's mother. *Her* hovering and interference would have been better than a blatant disregard for Octavia.

She smiled. "Are the rooms readied?"

"Everything is in order."

Octavia tried to keep her tone pleasant. "Her Grace asked me to walk through and inspect each one with you before the visit."

"That's not necessary." The housekeeper pursed her lips. "And I don't have time."

Octavia couldn't back down, or she'd never have any authority after she and Guy married. "Is there someone else who can take me around the embassy?"

The housekeeper didn't even flinch. "My maids keep the rooms clean."

"I'm certain they do. My room is always in excellent order."

The housekeeper shrugged. "Then it is settled. There is no need to inspect the rooms." She turned away.

Octavia knew better than to antagonize a servant. She'd only get worse service. She backed down. "Thank you for the fine work you and your staff do. Please thank them for the extra work they are doing to prepare for this visit." She would replace that housekeeper

as soon as they returned from the wedding, but would the rooms be a disaster when the queen and her guests arrived?



\* \* \*

The queen's attendants had wandered into the wrong hallway. It was easy to do. Their whispered voices echoed in the corridor. "The yellow in that room is horrible. It should be orange."

"Yes, and did you see the dust? The staff are not very thorough. I cleaned it myself before the queen could see."

Octavia hid in the entry to her room. Every word drove home the same points. She was right, but no one listened to her. Just like the tea blend. She was right to order something else, but the housekeeper and chef kept serving the old tea.

"And the dinner was so late. On another day, yes, but today, after traveling? She was so hungry."

"We all were."

Octavia slipped into her room and stopped listening. The queen's visit had started terribly, and it was her fault. She didn't know how to manage a staff of this size, and she'd never planned an event this important in her life.

Guy's mother and Mama kept telling her to do things on her own, then they told her to change every decision she made. They'd even hinted that they would return to England, after the staff changed her Easter dinner plans. Mama and Guy's mother knew what she had wanted, and they must have seen that the dinner was the complete opposite of her wishes. They probably couldn't bear to stay and watch her fail.

Guy probably didn't want to see her mistakes either. They would reflect poorly on him, and she would embarrass him.

She had completely lost control of the household management, but she had no authority to make any changes. Nothing had prepared her for this halfway position with all of the responsibility and no ability to carry out any decisions. "Never get engaged," she muttered to herself, as she echoed Guy's frustration from the other night.

Octavia's stomach tightened, and she collapsed onto her bed. Why had she ever thought being a hostess or meeting royalty would be fun?

# Chapter 24

Queen Victoria was ready to leave for Versailles, and Guy was not. Well, Guy was, but Octavia was not.

He pounded on her door. "You look well enough."

"It. Is. The. Queen!" Octavia shouted through the thick wood. "You cannot even see my attire."

"You always look well." He pulled his watch out of his vest pocket. They only had fifteen minutes to get down to the carriage. He paced along the corridor.

The door burst open, and Lady Shelford pushed Octavia out of her room. "No, you cannot stay behind and cower beneath your bed covers." Lady Shelford looked up. "Your Grace."

Octavia continued talking to her mama as if Guy was not there. "What if I say or do something wrong? You always tell me so." She looked pale. "So does Guy."

He stared at her. *What did she mean? Always?* Had he ever said that?

Maybe he had. He grimaced.

Lady Shelford glanced at him and sighed. "The duke is standing in front of you. He can hear you."

"You see?" Octavia said miserably. "Everything I do is wrong. I should not go."

How could she think that? She looked like a vision. Her deep blue dress heightened the color of her eyes, and the fitted form accentuated her curves. Her pale blonde hair was smoothed back in a perfect bun with delicate braids woven along each side. She was the picture of elegance and beauty.

Guy corrected his expression. She probably thought the grimace was for her, when he was angry with himself. He smiled gently. "Please come. This was your idea."

Octavia smiled up at him, a wobbly smile.

"The queen will be ready to leave in ten minutes."

Octavia's smile brightened, and Guy hated the artificial brilliance of it. She tugged at his arm. "Let us make haste then."

"I wasn't the one dawdling," he growled.



Her mask slipped, and Octavia froze. Guy could have kicked himself.

“Keep walking,” Lady Shelford said, and nudged her from behind. “The duchess is already downstairs.”

Octavia eyed the door to her bedchamber.

“Absolutely not,” Lady Shelford said. “You are the future duchess. You cannot hide any time something frightens you. Spencer never shrank from his duty. Percy embraced his role when Spencer died. You must learn not to run from your new role.”

Octavia’s chin trembled.

Guy took her arm. Why did Lady Shelford compare Octavia to her siblings? It only made things worse. He led Octavia along the hallway, down the spiral staircase, and across the grand entrance. A long line of black conveyances dotted the grey street.

The queen and her entourage were seated in their carriages. He escorted Octavia up the stairs and into the carriage with the Woodford crest, then helped Lady Shelford. Mother was already seated inside. She met his gaze, and he saw her unspoken embarrassment.

He hopped up the stairs and rapped on the ceiling, letting the driver know they were ready to follow the queen’s carriage, whenever she left.

They waited in tense silence until the carriage finally pulled away. Mother tried to start a conversation with Lady Shelford, but Guy didn’t listen. He was watching Octavia. Her leg was bouncing up and down, and she was drumming her fingers on her knee.

“How much sleep are you getting?” Guy asked quietly.

She tore her eyes away from the window. “Why?”

“Are you still reading late at night?” Guy couldn’t find his copy of *Egypt and Nubia*, and Octavia had dark circles beneath her eyes. He knew better than to comment on her appearance right now, though.

“What if I am?” she asked. Her chin was set now.

He didn’t dare tell her that she clearly needed more sleep.

“What are you reading? Anything interesting?” Guy smiled at her.

Octavia gave him a blank look. Her mind was miles away. Years away. She was probably thinking about Spencer still.

Guy leaned forward and tried to take her hand. “I’ll lend you my book on Nile River cruises, if I can find it.”

"I finished it a few weeks ago," Octavia said. "Didn't I return it? I'm sorry." She dropped his hand and gazed out the window again.

Guy gritted his teeth. She wandered in and out of his personal library, rearranging his books and taking anything she wanted. He was accustomed to being obeyed, never having orders questioned, and running his estate and the embassy without interference. Now he couldn't even finish his own book, and his own steward and valet clearly let her do anything she wanted, despite his orders.

Guy rubbed his temples.

"You're angry," Octavia whispered.

"If you'd just leave my books alone," Guy snapped. His voice was louder than he'd intended. "I really wanted to read that one."

Mother whipped her head around and widened her eyes. He instantly felt ashamed.

"I'll be the death of him," Octavia said. "Go ahead and mutter it. I know what you're thinking."

He *had* been thinking something along those lines. She ought to respect his property a bit more, at the very least.

Mother's quiet voice filled the painful gap. "You bring him to life, Octavia, in a way that no one else does."

Guy didn't know how to fix the things he'd just broken. Things felt right most of the time when they were together, but he also knew exactly how many obstacles they faced. Perhaps too many.

Neither was so besotted that they couldn't see the other's faults. They'd known each other too long to have any sort of blind-eyed love or to keep quiet about the faults they saw. He had worked on the "keeping quiet" part, but even when he did keep quiet, Octavia guessed his thoughts.

She kept her eyes trained out the window. "Mama, I'm going to return to the embassy. Will you come with me?"

Lady Shelford glared at him across the carriage. "Yes."

"It's almost an hour each way," Guy said, "and you said you wouldn't let her hide from her responsibilities."

"The grooms can provide fresh horses for the return journey," Lady Shelford said coolly. "And she is showing remarkably good judgment at the moment. It's not her *duty* she is avoiding." Lady Shelford narrowed her eyes.

Guy looked helplessly at his mother, who pinched her lips into the thinnest line he'd ever seen.

"Don't speak of Octavia as though she isn't present. You can

hear us, can't you, dear?" Mother directed her gaze at Octavia and smiled beautifully.

Octavia returned an uncertain smile. "Every word. Even the ones you don't speak." The hurt on her face pierced him.

But how could he stop from noticing her flaws? No one was perfect.

The carriage rolled to a stop. Mother descended the steps with the help of a footman, and Guy hovered in the hostile interior of the carriage.

"Go on, Woodford," Lady Shelford said. "Don't keep Queen Victoria waiting."

Octavia sniffed and hid behind her mother's side.

Guy clenched his jaw to prevent any other stupid remarks from tumbling out of his mouth. He left the carriage and escorted Mother toward the entrance. After weeks of being engaged, it felt wrong to have anyone other than Octavia at his side.

"Excuse me, Mother," he said, and quickly returned to the carriage. He couldn't let Octavia leave while she was hurting so badly. He strode back toward the endless line of carriages, searching for the Woodford crest. He stopped the groom before his vehicle could leave.

Guy ducked his head inside. Octavia squealed and shifted sideways.

It hurt that she was avoiding him. All he could see was the deep-blue shoulder of a dress tucked into Lady Shelford's side. "I'm sorry, Octavia. I was ill-tempered, and I apologize. Please don't miss this opportunity to visit Versailles because of me."

She peered around her mother's side.

"You *do* bring me to life," Guy said. He held out his hand, trying to hide his impatience. The queen was probably looking for him to lead the delegation, but this was more important.

Octavia emerged from her mother's side and grudgingly took his hand. "Thank you," she said stiffly. "I shouldn't take your books without asking. I'm sorry, too." She opened her parasol and tilted it to hide her face from him.

If they could at least apologize every time they fought, there was hope. Someday they might grow old and used to each other's annoying habits.

She and Lady Shelford walked silently to the entrance with him. The chatter of birds and crunching of loose gravel underfoot could

not fill the emptiness between them.

“How are you enjoying the gardens, Lady Shelford?”

She barely acknowledged him before putting up her parasol. Guy walked between walls of silk. He could feel Octavia’s anger radiating in waves, scalding him with her poise and distance. Guy pushed his shoulders back and let his own face slip into a mask.

Frustration boiled inside him, too. He knew he’d gone too far, and he’d hurt her and didn’t know how to begin to make amends. Worry and desperation and fear crowded the sunlight from the otherwise perfect spring day, and he scuffed his boots on the path as he frantically searched for ways to keep Octavia on his arm for the rest of the afternoon. He would lose her if he didn’t get himself under control.

He was no prize. He had a quick temper and was too slow to praise her. He hardly deserved Octavia, even with her faults, and he needed to focus on his own habits instead of hers, if he wanted to get married. Octavia sniffed, but he couldn’t see her face. The blasted parasol still hid her expression.

She deserved a successful start as his duchess. The queen was here, the emperor was here, half of the French elite would attend the evening’s festivities, and everyone knew they were engaged. He could worry about Octavia’s flaws, or he could try to bring out her strengths and make her look good. He put his hand over Octavia’s, and some of his annoyance ebbed instantly. They were only books, and Octavia had apologized.

Fountains splashed as they approached the entrance. He would throw his cares away, like a coin into a wishing well, and start over. He was here to help the leaders of two nations prevent war. Surely, he could make peace with his future wife.

He drew Octavia closer to his side. “I’m glad you decided to stay,” he whispered. “Diplomacy isn’t all drudgery. *I* am a bit of a drudge and a numbskull—”

Lady Shelford sniffed, as if she agreed.

“—but the visits are fairly enjoyable, especially with you.”

Octavia shifted her parasol to the other shoulder. “I’ve been admiring the hedges. Have you ever seen such ridiculous shapes?” She flashed a tentative smile.

They fought so easily, but they reconciled quickly, too. He would stop finding fault so quickly, and he would try to remember to praise her more often. They were lucky that they already knew

each other so well. Most couples probably took years to learn how to fight as well as they did.

Octavia gasped as the palace came into view. Gold trim glinted in the sunlight, brilliant against the blue slate roof. An elaborate clock hung in the middle of an ornate granite building. Pink stucco clung to the façade. Urns and statues danced along the roof and ledges where round windows were adorned by gilded frames. Countless windowpanes shimmered and reflected the light.

"It's more beautiful than Buckingham," Octavia said.

A woman's voice behind them said, "That gold is breathtaking, and the slate roof is stunning. Perhaps our palace needs a clock like that."

Guy and Octavia turned around to find Queen Victoria and Prince Albert directly behind them. Octavia flushed deepest red. Guy felt her tremble beside him.

"One can never have too many timepieces," Guy said with a forced air of casualness. "It is an impressive sight." He gestured to the queen and the prince consort to continue toward the palace and waited for her entourage to pass.

Octavia hardly spoke the rest of the day. Guy had to leave her to accompany the queen and Prince Albert. The French ambassador had seated her next to someone else during dinner, and then she danced with other men that evening. As she should have. As he knew she would. But every time he approached her, he saw a quiet, reserved woman who did not resemble the woman he loved, and he knew she must still feel mortified.

Octavia and Lady Shelford both pretended to sleep in the carriage on the way back to the embassy. Guy turned to his mother. She put a finger on her lips, shook her head, then closed her eyes, too.

Once again, he was all alone with no idea how to mend something that had shattered in a thousand pieces. This time, at least, *he* hadn't broken it, but he felt all the more powerless to put things right. He couldn't apologize or praise her or stop doing something wrong. He had seen her confidence vanish in an instant, and he had no idea how to restore it.

# Chapter 25

Octavia cried into Mama's shoulder as soon as they returned from Versailles. By the time the worst of the sobs were over, she was ready to dry her eyes and hide her pain. No matter how dearly she loved Guy, she knew what was best for him.

She had to leave.

She had to protect Guy from further humiliation. The queen would be in Paris for another day, and Octavia did not dare see her again.

Mama had agreed to return to England. Percy and Eleanor lived in England, and Mama desperately wanted to see her grandson.

But Octavia could not imagine Guy's face when she told him. He would convince her, somehow, to stay, and then she would make things worse for him, again and again and again. No. She had to leave without telling him, or she would never have the strength to leave.

And so the tears started again the next morning.

Octavia waited until she knew Guy would be in a meeting with the queen, and she slipped quietly into the Yellow Room. "Yelverton. Get me out of here." She glanced at Thorne and Rushworth. "Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt."

They stared at her, then jumped to their feet. "Get you out of where?" Yelverton asked.

"Paris. Now. I don't care what it takes, but I'm leaving on the first train to Calais."

Thorne and Rushworth left the table, piled high with work documents, and came over to her.

"You've been crying," Rushworth said, and he held out his hand. He drew her into a hug. Thorne shoved him out of the way.

"I'm her favorite pretend brother," Thorne said, and he pulled her into a hug. "I'm so sorry."

Yelverton looked at her awkwardly. "It's completely inappropriate for them to hug you."

Octavia let her arms hang limply at her sides. "Who makes these rules?"

Yelverton shoved Thorne out of the way. He draped an arm around her shoulder and sighed. "I suppose I'm relegated to the position of brother-like friend, too?" He glanced at the door. "If Woodford sees us, I'm dead."

Octavia fought back tears. The weight of his arm felt friendly and reassuring, with no awkwardness between them. "Of course you are, but you're wasting time. Someone get a schedule for the trains, please. I'm going to pack the essentials. You can send the rest later."

Yelverton removed his arm quickly. "I'm like a brother to you? Or I'm dead if Woodford sees us?"

Rushworth laughed. "Both."

Octavia nodded. "Best not to let him see us."

Thorne paced the length of the Yellow Room. "Has there been another attack? A bomb?"

Yelverton led her to a chair, and Octavia collapsed gratefully.

She shook her head. "I insulted the queen within her hearing yesterday. Surely you heard everyone gossiping about it."

None of them denied it.

"I'll never be a proper duchess." Her eyes clouded over, but she lifted her chin. "I'm breaking my engagement, but don't get your hopes up. I'm unfit to marry anyone."

Yelverton gaped at her. "You're serious? This is a terrible mistake. As much as it pains me to admit it, there were never two people destined for each other like you and Woodford."

Octavia wiped her eyes. "You read too much love poetry. People aren't destined for each other, and I will never, ever be suitable for him. You know me well enough. You just reprimanded me for hugging you. I will always embarrass Guy."

Rushworth held up his hands. "Woodford *will* kill us if we help you leave. I want no part in this."

Octavia threw back her head. "I will if he doesn't. One hour. I'm packing. My mother and I are leaving. Two tickets. And you are not going to tell him until the last possible moment tonight."

"Then I am coming," Clara's voice rang out from behind her. "And my parents. Five tickets. Seven tickets, with our maids. Papa's valet. Eight." She hovered in the space between rooms. "If you're leaving, I will accompany you." She met Octavia's gaze, and there was pleading in it. "If I can convince my parents."

"Oh! You're right. Mama and I must bring our maids. Ten

tickets, Thorne. Rushworth. Whoever's willing to help. Tell your parents that I've invited you to Shelford, and we can avoid the Season together. Mama will be glad if I have a friend, so she can spend more time in London with the grandbaby." She steeled herself to say the name. "Spencer."

"This is a nightmare," Yelverton muttered. "Just when Woodford almost trusts me."

Ice froze in her veins. "That's what Guy keeps saying about me. Everywhere I go, people say that about me."

"No." Thorne rushed to her side. "He didn't mean it like that, and neither did Woodford. You're not a nightmare." He glared at Yelverton and Rushworth, then turned to Clara. "You are certain you wish to leave?" His jaw was tight.

Clara bit her lip. "It's no use, Reggie. You know my parents."

"So you're giving up? Both of you?" He looked between Octavia and Clara, and his pain was almost palpable.

Octavia left her seat and assumed her haughtiest air. "Are you going to help or not? I will leave whether or not you assist me, and you can tell the duke that you left me to travel across France without any aid."

Yelverton and Rushworth exchanged a glance. Thorne leaned both fists on a table. "Clara. Octavia." A vein pulsed in his neck. "I regret your decisions. Of course, I will do everything in my power to protect you in your ridiculous course of action."

"Reggie!" Clara said.

Thorne spoke through clenched teeth. "Ten tickets. One hour. Go. Pack, and we'll send the rest later. We'll find footmen to accompany you and keep you safe. With the meeting between the queen and the emperor yesterday, travel should be easier and safer than usual."

"Yes, but our lives are about to get much harder," Yelverton muttered.

"At least he wasn't here to see the hugging," Rushworth said with a grin. "I don't think he would understand the brotherly way you feel about us."

"Well, we're no longer engaged, and it's no longer his concern," Octavia said, with a hitch in her voice. "I can feel any way I wish toward anyone now."

"But we value our lives," Thorne said, "so we will always remain brotherly in our affections toward you. Just don't be surprised if



you read of the sudden death of three British undersecretaries tomorrow.”

Octavia and her maid crammed gowns and brushes and unmentionables into their trunks. She found *Boat Life in Egypt and Nubia* on a bedside table. She had begun to outline a honeymoon for herself and Guy using the book. A fresh bout of tears overwhelmed her.

“Do I have enough changes of clothes to get home?” Octavia asked, and her maid nodded. “Excuse me. I have to return a book.”

She couldn’t take his book, especially since it was the one they’d argued over. Octavia ran across the hall to his chambers. *Locked*. She pounded on it.

His valet opened the door. She handed the book to him without a word and ran back to her room.

She fastened her traveling cloak and shut out the memories of arriving in Paris from Italy. A thought struck her. *Guy*. She should leave him a note.

Octavia sat at her writing desk and scribbled a letter while her maid scrambled to pack as much as she could. She ran across the hall and pounded on the door to Guy’s apartment again.

The valet looked amused this time. Octavia handed him the letter, turned, and raced to Mama’s room. “I’m ready.”

Mama’s maid was frantic, too. Mama paused. “I’m writing a note to Her Grace.”

“I left one for Gu—for His Grace.”

“Oh, don’t start calling him that now,” Mama said. “He’ll always be Guy to you.” She rested her hands on Octavia’s shoulders. “Are you certain you wish to leave?”

Octavia nodded vigorously. “I’ve broken my engagement, Mama. I cannot leave soon enough.”

Mama’s eyes filled with tears. “I’ll meet you at the carriage.”

Octavia stopped in her room to take one last look around. “I’m ready to leave, Burton,” she said. “Thank you for packing so quickly.”

Burton smiled. “I don’t mind a little adventure.”

Octavia fought against the wave of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. “I am tired of crying. Please stop being so kind to me.”

Burton added another pair of slippers to the open trunk. “I could

be grumpy like the duke, but it's not my place to comment on whether that makes you cry, too, or not."

"Thank you, Burton. I'll see you at the train station," Octavia said through a haze of tears.

She rushed down the corridor and down the spiral staircase, trying to forget the night that Guy carried her up the steps in his arms. She stopped in the grand entrance.

She wished she had time to bid farewell to everyone, but then she reconsidered. Did she? The cooks had overruled her Easter dinner instructions. The butler had set the wrong centerpieces when she only asked for one kind of flower. Once. For Easter. She let them decide every other time.

The footmen at least had unlocked the library for her. She might miss the footmen. She'd definitely miss Pharaoh and her puppies and Estelle.

"Blast," she muttered, and wiped her eyes. She found an assistant in the entrance and asked for a paper and pen. She scribbled another note. "Will you deliver this to Estelle? She is Disdéri's daughter. The photographer."

She stuffed herself inside a carriage and waited for Mama and Clara and her parents. Yelverton handed some tickets and an itinerary to Lord Prouton. "You're certain?"

Octavia met his gaze. "Yes. I'm sorry for any difficulty this will cause you."

Yelverton smiled. "I'm learning how to deal with the duke. Never mind about that. Safe travels."

Rushworth ducked his head into the carriage as Yelverton left.

"I'm sorry," Octavia sighed.

Rushworth grinned. "Say hello to Mrs. Phillips for me."

Octavia smiled weakly. Mama chuckled. "I shall be certain to keep Her Grace apprised of any interesting tidbits. You may depend on me to be a regular correspondent."

Rushworth tipped his chin toward Mama and ducked back out of the carriage.

Thorne climbed into the six-person carriage.

"You're not coming with us, Reggie," Clara said.

His face registered hurt. "I wanted to wish you a safe journey."

"You don't have to always worry about my safety."

Thorne cleared his throat. "I promised that I would never let you come to harm."

“When your dog was chasing a Christmas pudding. That hardly applies here.”

Thorne regarded his audience before returning his attention to Clara. “I will worry about you. I will miss you.”

She studied her gloves. “Thank you.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be back to England.” Thorne tried to catch her eye, but Clara ran her fingers along the seam of her leather traveling gloves.

Lord and Lady Proutton glanced at each other and contemplated the interaction with interest. Mama nudged Octavia, and she looked up to watch Thorne say farewell in the midst of a crowded carriage.

Thorne slipped a box of peppermint lozenges into Clara’s lap. “For the boat crossing between Calais and Dover. I know you felt sick last time.”

“Oh.” Clara bit her lip. “I did.” She stared at the tin and ran a finger around its edge. She glanced at Thorne, and her cheeks pinked when their eyes met. “Thank you.”

Anything else Thorne might have said seemed to have fled. He scrambled back out of the carriage without a backward glance, and Lord Proutton gave the signal for the carriage to leave.

There was a tug as the vehicle moved away from the embassy. She was really leaving. Mama put a hand on her arm. “This is hard, isn’t it, Ocky?”

The old childhood nickname felt like a blanket of affection this time. Octavia rested her head on Mama’s shoulders. “A little rough,” she whispered.

“Eh? Think we’ll have rough seas?” Lord Proutton chuckled. “Thorne brought my girl peppermint drops. Fine man. No title, but a good prospect nonetheless.” Lord Proutton nodded at Clara importantly. “Shame he’ll be in France for the next few years.”

Clara’s eyes widened. “I didn’t think you’d consider him. We’ve known him so long, and you don’t seem to regard his prospects.” The carriage picked up speed.

“Silly girl,” Lady Proutton said. “If the Duke of Woodford’s friend pursues you, you don’t chase him away. What have you done? The man practically proposed in the carriage, and you pushed him away. No wonder you’re not married yet.”

Clara covered her mouth with her hand, then uncovered it. Octavia clasped her hand silently and turned toward the small window behind them. She thought she could almost make out the

forms of Thorne, Rushworth, and Yelverton standing in the courtyard.

Mama and Lady Proutton began to discuss the travel itinerary, but the details made Octavia queasy. It wasn't the thought of crossing the sea again. It was the finality of her sudden and spontaneous decision.

There would be an ocean between them. A chasm. A space so dark and uncrossable that she and Guy could never return to the closeness they had once felt.

And it was her choice. It was her doing. She had broken the engagement. She had left the only man she thought she would ever love.

Octavia and Clara both watched the embassy as long as they could through the back window, until the building and the men became nothing more than shadows and memories.

It was time to cross the Channel and return to England.

## Chapter 26

Guy opened the letter with a grimace. He'd looked everywhere for Octavia as soon as his meetings ended, but all he could find was this note from his bemused valet. The footmen and housekeeping staff were all scowling at him, so it couldn't be good news.

He pulled off his boots and dropped onto the worn chair where he read in the evenings. His eyes scanned the first line. *I'm returning to Shelford.*

Guy stopped reading. What kind of dangerous lark did she think this was? His heart pounded. As if trying to broker peace between France and England wasn't enough for one day. There were so many details to work out. Yes, the queen's visit had been a success yesterday, but that was no guarantee of safety.

He picked the letter up again and continued reading. *And breaking our engagement.*

Guy hit his fist on the side table and began to pace as he finished her letter. Phrases jumped off the page. *Too young. Not suitable.*

He crumpled the letter and threw it in the corner. *Utter nonsense.* A knock sounded on the door, and he wheeled around. Yelverton.

"What?" Guy growled.

"How did your meetings go?" Yelverton asked. "I was pleased with mine."

Guy continued to pace up and down the length of his personal chambers. "Excellent." His reply was curt. He was in no mood to discuss diplomacy with the puppy, and certainly not here. "Couldn't have gone better."

And his engagement couldn't have gone worse.

Yelverton didn't take the hint. He would never make a decent diplomat. Instead, he entered the room and picked up the balled-up letter on the floor. "What's this?"

"None of your blasted business," Guy said gruffly.

Yelverton smoothed out the paper. "Octavia left you a letter."

"Octavia left *me*," Guy said. "She left *France*. Idiotic, unsafe, reckless thing to do."

Yelverton crushed the letter in his hand. "Don't talk about her like that."

Guy stopped pacing and approached Yelverton. "Are you going to follow her back to England now?"

Yelverton's face flushed. "If I wanted to do that, I'd have accompanied her."

A deadly anger pounded in his veins. "Explain yourself *now*." He grabbed Octavia's letter back from Yelverton, smoothed it, and pocketed it.

"I arranged for her departure." Yelverton met Guy's gaze with defiance.

Guy took a step closer, towering over the young viscount. "Is that why you've come to my room at this time of night? You have *one* chance to tell me what that means."

Yelverton didn't back away. "She insisted on leaving, and I made sure her passage was safe."

Guy felt like he'd been punched in the gut and the face at the same time. His anger got the better of him. "How dare you break my engagement? What have you been doing with her behind my back?"

Yelverton laughed without humor. "Nothing. Believe me."

Guy flexed his fists.

"Octavia broke the engagement because she can never be a proper duchess." Yelverton straightened his shoulders and met Guy's gaze defiantly. "Her words, not mine."

Silence stretched between them while Guy took deep, steady breaths. He tried to remain in control of his temper.

Octavia must know how deeply he cared for her, even when she made mistakes. Who cared about the color of wall hangings, truly, or which pudding was served?

"What else?" Guy muttered.

Yelverton studied him. "She believes that she is unfit to marry anyone. Her words."

Guy clenched his fists. "How can she think that about herself? I've tried and tried to tell her..."

Yelverton arched an eyebrow.

"And?" Guy asked through a set jaw.

"You bluster around and hide your admiration under a thick scowl." Yelverton seemed to be bracing for a blow.

"Leave." Guy paced up and down. "I want to wallow in my

stupidity.”

“No.” Yelverton collapsed onto the chair. “I’m staying in Paris. I already told you.”

Guy snorted. “Because I want you to leave.”

Yelverton smirked at him. “Possibly. Or possibly because I care about your friendship.”

Guy took another series of steadying breaths and steepled his hands. He really didn’t need this selfless loyalty from Yelverton right now. “If you stay, I’ll appoint you as deputy ambassador.”

Yelverton gaped at him. “Is that a threat?”

Guy sunk his head in his hands. “Yes. Do you have any idea what kind of torture diplomacy can be? Haven’t the last two days been enough for you?”

Yelverton shook his head. “I want to learn.”

“Terrible decision,” Guy muttered.

Yelverton leaned back in Guy’s favorite chair and settled in.

“Fine. Tell me how you arranged Octavia’s departure,” Guy demanded.

Yelverton met his gaze and grinned. “Is this an interview to determine my qualifications?”

Guy crossed the room and bent over the chair. “I’m determining how much to hurt you. Talk quickly before my anger decides for me.”

The grin left Yelverton’s face.

“You’re not safe until I know she is,” Guy said. “Start talking.”

Yelverton straightened. “She left with her mother, Lady Clara, and her parents. And their maids and a valet. Ten tickets. On an hour’s notice.”

“Impressive. You have the job. My condolences.” Guy waved his hand. “Continue.”

“I asked a few footmen to accompany them. They agreed to wear clothing that was made here in Paris, so their appearance is unexceptional. Rushworth and Thorne deserve some of the credit.”

Guy snorted. “Nice try, but I’m holding you responsible. And nothing about Octavia is unexceptional. She is extraordinary in every way, even in the simplest day dress.”

Yelverton continued, “Nevertheless, they will not speak on the train where their accents might be overheard. We took every precaution we could conceive, checked every time schedule, and packed food so they would not have to buy any. We were as

thorough in our planning as we could be with such short notice.”

Guy paced up and down the room again. It was a decent plan, if risky. He was impressed against his will.

But why hadn't Octavia said farewell in person? Her fears of inadequacy must be even more deeply entrenched than he realized. “Stupid reason to end an engagement,” he muttered.

She'd planned this behind his back with Yelverton. Octavia had slipped away when she knew that he would be occupied with meetings and unable to stop her. He was a only door or two away. She might have walked past him on her way out of the embassy.

She'd always been smarter than him. She won most chess games, and once again she had beaten him with strategy, and he had lost.

“Am I safe yet?” Yelverton asked.

Guy had forgotten he was in the room. “Yes, fine. You're deputy ambassador, if you want the deuced position, and I won't harm you.” He turned to consider him. “You're not going after her? Trying to marry her, now that she's not engaged?”

Yelverton's face stiffened. “No. She made it quite clear that would never be an option.”

The men stared at each other a long while, then Guy grimaced. “I'm sorry. You and I are in the same club now. We should form the ‘I-Almost-Married-Octavia Club.’ How many other members will there be?”

“One or two that I know of,” Yelverton said. “That doesn't include Rushworth or Thorne. They're sincerely disinterested.”

Guy nodded absent-mindedly and began pacing again. Was *he* the cause of Octavia's distress? Why didn't she trust herself? Was it because he still doubted her secretly?

Waves of pain crashed over him, and regrets threatened to drown him. He swallowed hard.

“You're leaving, Woodford. As your deputy ambassador, I'm not going to sit by and stand for this.” He rubbed his neck. “As your deputy, I know I went behind your back and sent your wife home. Fiancée. Ex-fiancée.”

Guy's throat felt thick.

“But I had a long talk with her.”

The power of speech returned suddenly and completely to Guy. “Alone?”

“Of course not. With Rushworth and Thorne. That's what I'm telling you. I'm trustworthy, as much as it seems like I'm not.”



Guy collapsed in his chair. "Continue."

"Octavia is really confused right now, and she's hurting. I heard her talking with Thorne and Rushworth, and I realized that I'd never loved her. I would have done her a disservice if she'd agreed to marry me. I was in such a rush to marry that anyone would do."

Guy dropped his head into his hands as needles of remorse spiked through his heart. "I rushed into things, too. Like an idiot, I asked too much of her too quickly, and now she's run away."

"Do you know how old I was when I became a viscount?"

Guy shook his head.

"Three."

He leaned back in his chair. "I'm so sorry you lost your father so young."

Yelverton let out a deep breath. "I've been so desperate to form a family that I've gone from one woman to the next, imagining myself in love with anyone who is kind to me. The others talked about love, true love, and I realized I've been lonely and selfish and immature and desperate and overeager, but never in love."

Guy shook his head and thought quickly, trying to form the right words to console his friend.

Yelverton waved him off and continued. "No. I've been every bit the puppy everyone accuses me of being. My mother has run the estate my whole life and sheltered me from any kind of responsibility."

Guy scrutinized him. "Your father was reputed to be a fine man and one of the most active in the House of Lords, yet you hardly attend. I don't think you have to live a life of dissipation. You could be more, if you wanted it."

Yelverton swallowed. "I'm ready to accept responsibility at home, but my mother isn't ready to relinquish it. I'm tired of the games and the matchmaking and the mindless pursuits that are left to me, so I came abroad trying to find a place where I could do something meaningful."

"And you shall," Guy said.

"I did not intend to talk about myself. I'm doing a poor job of trying to explain that I never should have helped Octavia leave. She was so determined that I didn't see a way to force her to stay, but I should have tried harder. I see that now, and I'm sorry."

Guy moved to a slim writing desk tucked into one corner of the chambers. He took out a sheet of paper and began to write.

*To the French Ambassador,*

*Lord Yelverton is my new deputy ambassador. He also proposed marriage to Lady Octavia, and he secretly helped her leave the country while you and I met to discuss the terms of peace between our countries. He is clever and devious, and I wish you the best of luck with him.*

*As deputy ambassador, he will have to stay in France while I travel to England to pursue Lady Octavia. Please keep him occupied for my sake.*

*Yours in haste,*

*The Duke of Woodford, Ambassador to France for England*

Guy handed the note to Yelverton. "You're in charge of maintaining this fragile peace until I return."

"Completely?" Yelverton asked, as he read the letter. He finished the letter with an incredulous look on his face. "How long will you be gone?"

"Don't worry. This will raise you in his estimation. I'll be gone as long as it takes for successful negotiations with Octavia," Guy said with a smirk. "And for me to learn how to stop being an idiot."

"Ah," Yelverton said with a grin and slapped Guy on the back. "I'll settle in for a while."

## Chapter 27

Guy steepled his hands and contemplated the piles of papers on his desk. He wanted to sweep them all into the fireplace and leave for England at once. He was already a week behind Octavia. If he decided to go.

A thick envelope on the corner of his desk caught his eye. “Yelverton? What is this? I’m trying to clear off my desk, but things keep appearing to prevent my departure.”

“You’ll want to open that before you go,” Yelverton said. “Trust me.”

He hesitated. There would always be another urgent missive and another reason to stay in Paris. But Octavia did not want to return to Paris. She did not want him to chase her to England. Her note had been quite clear.

Guy slid open the packet and a jumble of *cartes de visite* fell out. Him with Octavia. Octavia with her hair loose and a romantic blur over the photo. The group photo.

He shoved the pictures back into the envelope. His heart pounded at the shock. He still remembered the sitting in Disdéri’s studio. He’d positioned himself behind Octavia, and the photographer had placed his hand on her shoulder. He’d been able to feel her tremble at his touch, even through his gloves.

Then she’d stood against his back, trembling again, waiting for the photographer, and every second stretched into eternity. There was a picture with only the two of them, his hand wrapped around her waist, as if they were married. Guy didn’t know whether to throw the portraits in the Seine or kiss them.

And the way she’d laughed when Disdéri had taken her picture alone. Guy slipped the *carte de visite* out of the envelope again and gazed at the enchanting eyes. Somehow the still photo captured her vibrancy and love of life. Her lips were slightly parted in a laughing smile, and her dimpled cheeks glowed. A single curl brushed her neck, and her loose hair swept around her shoulders.

He felt almost indecent looking at it. Disdéri had created a masterpiece. *Octavia* was a masterpiece. He shoved his chair back

and went to find Mother.

She was sitting in the Blue Room. He hesitated at the entrance.

“Join me,” Mother said.

“I don’t want to,” Guy admitted. “I hate this room without Octavia in it.”

Mother shifted on her chair to look at him. “Sit.”

He entered the room and sat on Octavia’s favorite sofa. It felt empty without her to share it.

Guy handed three *cartes de visite* to Mother. “We took these pictures a few weeks back.”

She glanced at them and dropped them immediately, as if the pictures had scalded her. “Arabella and I tried to get you together for years.”

Guy picked them up and waved the pictures. “Lady Shelford must be relieved that Octavia’s come to her senses and left.” He stared at the images.

Mother removed the photographs from his hand and placed them upside-down, so nothing was visible except Disdéri’s name printed on the back. “No. She’s distraught.”

He scoffed and mumbled something.

“Because she left me a letter,” Mother said.

Guy looked up.

“She didn’t want you to rush the courtship. She knew that once you and Octavia grew up—both of you—she wouldn’t be able to stop you. And she was right. It took less than a week.”

“Six days,” Guy muttered.

“But it was too quick for Octavia. She has no notion of what being a duchess and an ambassador’s wife entails. She was overwhelmed.”

Guy clenched his fists. “I have no self-control around her. I’m ashamed of myself. No wonder Lady Shelford does not want me for a son-in-law.”

Mother shook her head. “Aren’t you listening? She does.”

“She sobbed her heart out.”

“She’s already lost her husband and a son. Shelford has married and has his own family now. Octavia is all she has left, her only daughter. The idea of being left alone in a dower cottage in Cambridge while her daughter lived in France was distressing.”

Guy started to pace. “But you were both going to live here with us.”

“You never asked us to stay.”

He rubbed his forehead. “Of course you would have lived here. Why would you leave?”

“So Octavia could find her own way without her mother-in-law interfering.”

Guy stared at her. Mother looked guilty. “Is there something I don’t know about? Are you the one who ordered the switch back to that bland blend of tea?”

Mother’s eyes widened. “You don’t like it?”

“I hate it. Octavia hates it. She finally ordered something drinkable, and then the staff started serving it again.”

Mother studied the embroidery in her lap. “If you didn’t like it, you should have said something.”

“You should have let her decide.” Guy took a deep breath. “Was there anything else?”

Mother looked up. “Easter dinner.”

“Octavia was upset,” Guy said. “Things did not go as she planned.”

“I interfered,” Mother said so quietly that he could hardly hear her. “I went to the kitchens and told the cooks to do things differently. And I might have spoken with the butler about the place settings.” She paused. “And the gardener changed the flower arrangements at my request.”

Guy tried to tamp down his frustration. “She was devastated that no one would listen to her. I daresay it’s part of the reason she believes she’d never make a good duchess. Every decision she made was overruled, and she didn’t know why.”

Mother hung her head. “I didn’t want Easter dinner ruined.”

He flared his nostrils. “Ruined? Because she wanted daffodils instead of lilies or roast beef instead of ham?”

“Something like that,” Mother said. “The way I’ve always done things seemed like the right way and the only way, and I couldn’t let you look bad. I thought I was correcting mistakes while I trained her, and I couldn’t fully turn over all the responsibilities at once.”

“But instead, you humiliated Octavia and destroyed any authority she had among the staff.” Guy leaned his head against the wall. “I’m sorry if it’s hard to give up your position as duchess, Mother, and become the dowager.”

“It’s not that. I’m happy to let someone else assume the role. Truly.” Mother wrung her hands in her lap. “In fact, after Easter

dinner, Lady Shelford and I determined to return to England as soon as you married. We told Octavia that we trusted her to handle the responsibilities alone."

"What?" Guy pushed off the wall. "She must have been beside herself. Why didn't she tell me?"

Mother's voice had reached an all-time whisper. "I told her that she shouldn't trouble you with anything. That's how your father wanted me to handle things."

That explained the false smiles and the bright looks, all the times he'd tried to get answers and she'd pushed him away.

"She seemed so eager to please me, and she didn't question anything I asked her to do." Mother paused. "Very uncharacteristic of her."

Guy laughed. "She wasn't herself at all after we became engaged. She didn't tell me any of her concerns. She needs to talk about everything, and I was so glad not to have to listen to—" He stopped himself and shot a guilty glance at Mother.

"I know." She sighed. "You don't enjoy approving menus, but you've been a dear and let me talk to you anyway. After your father died, I enjoyed the way you would listen to every little detail about the menus and the staff and the refurnishing. I can't believe I didn't expect that Octavia would also want and need to tell you about her day and her decisions. I gave her advice that I don't even follow myself."

"And now she's left me, because I treated her like an idiot," Guy said. "And I didn't see what she needed."

"And I contributed to her distress," Mother said. "Over and over, I hinted that her choices were wrong, when they were insignificant details. I need to let her do things her own way next time." She met his eyes. "And so do you."

Guy blew out a long breath. "There isn't any 'next time.' She's gone. Even if I could convince her to return..." His eyes drifted to the swirling grain of the polished marble floor. "Is she better off without me? Maybe *I'm* the one who isn't ready to marry yet."

Mother dropped her embroidery into her basket and joined him. She took his hands. "What does your heart tell you? Have you slept at all this past week? Have you eaten a single bite? Have you felt better or worse since she left?"

Guy brushed her concerns aside. His lack of appetite was irrelevant. "My feelings are not important. If she does not wish to

be my wife, I should respect her decision. I am not easy to live with."

Mother squeezed his hands. "She loves you, and she's knows exactly what you're like. I suspect that she's more afraid of disappointing you than anything else."

"I'm proud of her," Guy said. "She need never feel that I'm ashamed of her."

"Does *she* know that? You cannot tell her how to feel, but your actions can make it more likely that she will feel confident or uncertain."

The shame shredded Guy like a knife. Octavia saw right through him. She knew every thought that passed through his mind, because he couldn't hide it. His face gave him away every time.

If he sincerely wanted her to feel that way, he had to change the way he thought. He had to stop trying to make her into someone that she wasn't and would never be. But could *he* change in the short amount of time it would take to return to England?

Mother's voice startled him. "Do you remember your father?"

A surge of pride flashed through Guy. "Father is my rock, my inspiration. I try to honor him every day."

Mother smiled. "And yet, you are nothing like him. You are like me. Tell me what you remember of your father."

What would Father have done right now? "He was intelligent, handsome, brave, strong, loyal, true to the Crown, and hard-working."

Her eyes warmed at the memory. "He was the best of men, and you are all of those things." Then she frowned. "But do you remember his jokes?"

Guy grimaced. "I've tried to forget them."

"They were inappropriate and even rude at times," Mother said. "He could be blunt and say things that were awkward, and he could lose his temper with obvious stupidity."

"And his laugh." Guy grinned. "He had the loudest, most annoying laugh I've ever heard."

"But he drew people to him. He had a way of setting everyone at ease. He had a gift that you and I lack."

Guy nodded. "Everyone respected and admired him. He was loyal and loving."

"And funny," Mother said. "They were all thinking what he said, even if no one else would admit that what he said was true."

“So everyone forgave him and his blunders. They admired his honesty.”

She nodded. “That is part of why you’re drawn to Octavia. She is so much like your father. Was the queen angry or offended at Octavia’s blunder?”

Guy shook his head. “She thought it was a delightful joke.”

“Octavia is precisely the duchess you need, because you are too serious, and you work too hard. She balances you, and she has still been trained to run a large household. She is the daughter of an earl. She knows her way around Society and is a Diamond. She sparkles, while you’re still a little rough. Tell me, to whom are Yelverton, Thorne, and Rushworth more loyal? You or her?”

“Octavia, obviously. They helped her leave instead of alerting me.”

Mother smiled. “And whom do your valet, footmen and head of household respond to—you or Octavia?”

“Point taken. They trip over themselves to do anything she asks, even if it means disobeying a direct order from me. I’ll leave for Shelford in the morning, but how can I convince her to marry me when she thinks she’s unfit for marriage and unsuitable to be a duchess?”

Mother leveled her gaze. “Are you sure *her* opinions are the only ones that matter?”

Guy squirmed. Did he really trust Octavia’s behavior, or was he trying to control her, still, with his praise and his opinions? What if she never changed? Could he love her exactly the way she was?

“I’ve heard you say some things I’m not proud of,” Mother said. “I expected more gallantry from you, even with the bantering and bickering you two enjoy. Your confidence in her might go a long way toward restoring her own confidence in herself, and your frustrations can make her confidence vanish like dew in the morning sun.”

Guy felt like a six-year-old boy again. “You’re right.”

Mother’s gentle voice was hard as steel. “Sometimes our opinions of ourselves hang by the thread of someone else’s esteem. Fair or not, that may be how she’s feeling. If Octavia believes she’s nothing more than a headache to you, then I have raised you wrong. Your father made me feel like a queen, no matter how many mistakes I made. And I laughed at every one of his jokes.”

Guy arched an eyebrow.



"I laughed when we were among Society." Mother smiled. "There is a limit to my good grace, but I always protected him. He, in turn, supported me. When all of Society is looking to criticize your every movement as the duke and duchess, the two of you must be united. That doesn't mean you control each other. You support each other as equals. You choose each other once, then you choose each other every time after that."

Guy felt like a hurricane had cleared the clouds in his mind. Choose her every time. *Just the way she is*. It was so simple and so easy, if he just let go. If he just loved her. He was the Duke of Woodford, and he didn't have to worry about anyone's opinion.

Thorne entered the Blue Room. "I thought I heard voices."

Guy went over and clapped him on the back. "Just the man."

Thorne looked at Guy's hand suspiciously. "What?"

"I need someone to help me."

"What makes you think I'm the right person?" Thorne asked.

Guy put his other hand on Thorne's other shoulder and looked him squarely in the face. "Lady Clara went to stay with Octavia. I need someone to go to England and help me make a complete fool of myself."

Thorne grinned. "I'm your man."

# Chapter 28

Two weeks without a word from Guy. Mama kept threatening to take her to London for the Season, but Octavia steadfastly refused. Mama had been to London to see the grandbaby and brought him back with Percy and Eleanor. Spencer was terrorizing the household, but he had Octavia's dimples. One smile, and everything was forgiven. His antics were a welcome break from the endless nights and inane chatter of Society.

Octavia had had enough of balls and dinner parties and card games for a lifetime. "If you wish to go to London, Mama, you can return with Percy and Eleanor," Octavia said.

"Oh, yes, please do!" Eleanor pushed Spencer off her leg and set him back onto the rug.

"We cannot leave you alone," Mama whispered. "Lady Clara is our house guest."

Octavia set aside her thread and needle. "We are quite content."

Clara nodded. "We are enjoying this quieter life. Walks—"

Spencer crawled over to Clara and tried to climb up into her lap.

"And rides! Oh, I've missed our horses—" Octavia interrupted.

"And just sitting to embroider and keep my hands busy while we talk," Clara finished. Clara tried to shake Spencer off her leg, and he dimpled a smile at her. She set down her embroidery hoop and picked him up instead.

Octavia smiled. "I would like to go visit the Great Danes at Guy's stables, since he's gone. No chance of seeing him."

Clara exchanged a glance with Mama and Eleanor.

"Truly. I am glad," Octavia said, as the lie settled deeper into her heart. Each time she said it, she believed it a little bit more.

"Let us have a walk now," Clara said. "We shall show your mama how thoroughly entertained we are." She handed Spencer to Eleanor. "Would you like to join us, Lady Eleanor?"

Eleanor was wrestling with Spencer, who had immediately tried to grab all the embroidery threads from her basket. "Go ahead, dears," she panted. "Spencer needs some time with his papa, as soon as Percy's meeting with the steward is over. Never too early to

learn how to wrestle. Though, I suppose I could teach him.” She grinned at Octavia, who returned her smile. “Or his aunt could.”

“I suppose it’s not fair to sweep Spencer’s leg out from under him when he’s barely learning to walk?” Octavia asked. It was getting easier to say the name “Spencer” without thinking about her older brother. Her nephew had quickly charmed her.

Eleanor sighed. “Unfortunately. Give me a few more months.”

Octavia and Clara left the drawing room, picked up their parasols, and ventured outdoors.

“You pick which country lane we explore today,” Octavia said. The blue sky reminded her of Guy’s piercing eyes. “I wouldn’t mind a bit of cloud cover. It’s so—cloudless today.”

Clara laughed. “You usually prefer sunshine. Why do I suspect that has something to do with the duke?”

Octavia kicked her boots, and the dust on the path rose in puffs.

“You’re not hiding it very well,” Clara said.

“I’m an exceptional actress,” Octavia said. She twirled the parasol on her shoulder, as if she could spin the pain away.

“Tell me again all the things you *don’t* miss about His Grace.”

Octavia studied the curve in the path instead. “Left or right?”

Clara considered. “We’ve never taken the path on the left.”

“It goes to Guy’s estate.”

“Oh.” Clara fidgeted with her parasol now.

“I am well enough,” Octavia said. She had become thoroughly accustomed to lying to her friend. “Let us brave it.”

Clara pointed to the trees. “It has more shade.”

Octavia drew a deep breath. “And a river. We can put down our parasols and enjoy the water. I love the little bridge hidden behind the rock—”

“You’re avoiding my question,” Clara said.

“Nonsense.” Octavia set her parasol against a willow tree. She drew off her boots and peeled the hose from her legs and feet. “I’d like to wade in the stream.”

Clara tilted her head and grinned at her. “You can tell me from there. I’ll enjoy the shade from here. I will not be distracted.”

Octavia tiptoed along the narrow path she knew so well. The dirt felt heavenly, and the soft grass tickled her feet. She crossed the stream on her favorite stones, then settled onto a rock in the middle. The tree’s shade barely reached her. She wiggled her toes in the cool water, then drew her knees up beneath her chin.

"I'm waiting," Clara called from beneath the shade of the willow.

Octavia lifted her face to the sky, closed her eyes, and let the breeze blow across her skin. "Very well. I do not miss his eyes that are as blue as this cloudless sky. I do not miss the way his look made me feel like I was the most perfect being in the world. I do not miss Pharaoh or her puppies or my four-poster bed. I do not miss renovations or selecting wallpaper or Estelle or éclairs. I do not miss the Seine, because I have this stream. I do not miss France, because I have Cambridge. I do not miss the idea that he is perfect, which I had always thought, because he is not. He is grumpy, and irascible, and—"

"What *do* you miss?" A deep voice rumbled beside her ear.

Octavia startled and screamed, lost her perch, and tumbled into the stream. Her toes slipped on the smooth rocks, and her petticoats and skirts caught the water, tugging her forward. Strong hands caught her around the waist and hoisted her back onto the edge of the rock.

"I do not miss the feel of your hands around my waist."

He let go, and she tumbled back into the stream. She scrambled to find solid footing, but her bare feet slid on the mossy pebbles. Guy grabbed her again and held her tight. "I think you *do* miss me."

This time she didn't ask him to let go. Guy clasped her tight and heaved her onto the rock. His boots were slipping on the wet rocks, and he hauled himself onto the rock beside her. There was barely enough room for both of them, and his warm embrace was the only thing between her and another dive into the freezing cold stream.

Octavia tried to catch her breath. Why hadn't Clara warned her?

Because Thorne was talking to her beneath the willow.

Octavia sat, panting, on the rock. Her skirts were wet with water, and Guy's trousers clung to his ankles.

"I missed you," he said. His chest heaved, and she couldn't help glancing down at it. Her damp dress was soaking his dry shirt, and he didn't complain.

"You. Came. Across. The. Bridge?" Octavia nodded to the thin wooden planks behind her as her breath slowly returned.

Guy smiled. A low set of bushes hid the bridge. It was his favorite way to surprise her, and she would have suspected, if she'd known he was not in France.

His voice tickled her ear. "I'm sorry I startled you." He indicated

her wet skirts. "We'll have to sit in the sun until our clothes dry."

Octavia closed her eyes. She'd run away from him and had told him not to follow her. She'd broken the engagement. She'd quit. He hated quitters.

"There's not much sun on this rock," Octavia said, trying to inch away from him. She opened her eyes to inspect the shoreline. It would take far too long for her clothes to dry here, and she wanted to spend as little time with Guy as possible.

He scooped her up and trudged through the stream to the bridge. Water splashed everywhere as he stumbled across the riverbed. She wrapped her arms around him to keep from falling. He fought the stream's current, and his feet shifted beneath her. Octavia tightened her grip.

"You are safe," Guy whispered. "I have you." Finally, he dropped her onto the wooden planks, fully in the sunlight, and sat beside her.

"Last time you carried me like that, you proposed," Octavia said. The heat of the sunlight was nothing compared to the fire in her chest.

Guy turned to her. "Will you marry me?"

"No," Octavia said, willing that lie to also settle into her heart.

He sighed. "It worked last time." He ran a hand over her hair. "Was there something I forgot to do? What *else* did I do last time?"

She was falling into his endless eyes. He lifted a hand to cup her cheek, and Octavia swatted at it before she succumbed and kissed him. "Thorne and Clara can see us."

Guy shook his hand and rubbed the spot she had slapped. "Us. I like the sound of that. The last few weeks, there wasn't an 'us,' just me alone."

Octavia arranged her skirt to catch the breeze and absorb as much sunlight as it could, as quickly as it could. She needed to get home, away from him.

Guy nudged her with his elbow. "Us." His long, muscled legs dangled over the rickety wooden bridge. He took off his boots and poured water out of each one.

She was a headache, an embarrassment, and a nuisance, not a duchess. She pressed her lips together to keep the pain inside.

He searched her face. "Octavia, please. I came all the way from France to see you."

"I'm not a prize you win for taking a long trip," she snapped.

Guy froze with his boot in his hand. "I'm sorry. You're right."

Octavia wanted to leave, but her boots were over by the willow. She was trapped with him for another ten minutes at least until her feet dried off and her skirts weren't so heavy. "No, I'm sorry. That was unkind of me." She swung her legs restlessly. "I don't know why you came. I already told you—" She couldn't finish the sentence. She couldn't say "We're not engaged," when her heart still yearned for him, and she didn't want it to be true.

Guy dropped his boots on the bridge behind him. "What would you have thought of me if I hadn't come? How could I let things end between us without even attempting to speak to you or change your mind?" His eyes dropped to her bare feet. "You're right. You don't owe me anything because I traveled so far. You don't owe me anything at all, ever, for any reason."

She'd been watching for him every day for two weeks, but now that he'd come, she didn't want to face him. "I said everything in my letter."

"Have I ever seen your toes before? I mean, since you were six years old." He shook his head and looked at her. "I'm sorry. But I didn't get to respond to your letter and tell you how I felt."

Octavia bit back a sob. She clung to the edge of the splintery planks and watched the water flow beneath the bridge, easy and free. "You could have written back."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "I did not want to correspond with you. Some things are better expressed in person. I wanted to *see* you, to tell you myself."

Octavia shook out her skirts to avoid his gaze.

"Will you marry me now? If we're engaged, I can *show* you how I feel."

The playful tone in his voice almost made her smile. Almost. "No, Guy."

He turned and gazed deep into her eyes. "Why not?" He lifted a hand, as if to touch her cheek, then dropped it. He pulled the shirt away from his chest and fanned it back and forth.

*Because it was better for him this way.* "It won't dry faster, and you're spraying me with water," Octavia said, watching him and trying to hide her fascination. His coat lay on the grass by Thorne and Clara.

Guy rolled his head back and looked at the sky. His voice was thick with emotion. "I'm nervous. I need something to do with my

hands, because I want to hold you.”

Octavia pushed off the bridge and rose to her feet. The sun scalded her feet as she ran across the scorching wooden planks.

“No, wait!” Guy called after her.

She tiptoed over to the shade of the willow tree, holding her wet skirts with one hand. He’d be able to see more than her ankles, but it couldn’t be helped. She had to get her shoes on and leave before she threw her arms around him and promised to marry him again.

She’d already tried, and their engagement had been a disaster. She tugged the hose on her half-dry skin while Thorne kept his head averted. Clara giggled a time or two, and it sounded like Thorne might have snorted.

Octavia buttoned her boots. Why were there so many buttons? She finished and pushed up from the grass.

“Your Grace. Mr. Thorne. Welcome home. It has been—” She wasn’t sure what to say. She never knew what to say. She always said the wrong things. “Good afternoon.”

Guy stood in his bare feet. One hand held his soggy boots and his other hand wrapped around her arm. “May I visit you this afternoon? Or perhaps you’d like to come to my estate for dinner?” His eyes met hers. His touch was warm through the thin fabric of her sleeve. “I have some pictures I’d like to show you and Lady Clara. The *cartes de visite*. I can propose yet again, if you’re unclear about my intentions or feelings.”

Thorne helped Clara to her feet. “Please, do come for dinner.”

Clara smiled at Octavia. “We’d like that.”

“No, we wouldn’t,” Octavia mumbled.

“I heard that,” Guy said softly. He brushed a curl from her cheek. The sadness in his face tore at her defenses. “Why not? What has changed between us?”

Her boots were damp. Her stockings were falling down. Her skirts were lumpy and wet, and the walls around her heart were crumbling. “Nothing’s changed,” Octavia whispered. “That’s the problem.”

## Chapter 29

Guy paced up and down the entrance and tugged at his cuffs. He had bathed to make sure any residue from the stream was gone and worn his finest trousers and coat. He'd even put on some cologne from Paris.

What did she mean—*nothing had changed*? What did he need to change? Besides everything?

"Thorne, you're my advisor. Advise me." He ran a hand through his hair, then ran to the mirror and finger-combed it again.

Thorne laughed. "Ask away."

"She loves me." Guy paced over to the statues in one corner of the entrance. *Aphrodite*. Her dress fell in sculpted ripples across a marble beauty.

Thorne nodded.

"But she refuses to marry me." He crossed over to the statue of Ares. The chiseled features of the war god thundered over him.

Thorne crossed to the statue of Athena. "This is the one you need. I like your pantheon. It looks familiar."

Guy nodded absentmindedly. "Shelford liked it so much that he ordered a few replicas for his townhome in London." He peered down through one of the windows. "Wisdom is what I need tonight, if they actually come."

Thorne laid a hand on his shoulder. "What reasons did Lady Octavia give you for breaking the engagement, and what did your wise mother say?"

Guy started pacing again. "Octavia believes she's too young to be a duchess, and that I think her unsuitable for the role."

"Do you think that?"

Guy stopped. He had to be honest. "Not anymore, but she knows I've thought that in the past, and my mother has, too. In fact, my mother went behind Octavia's back to undermine her decisions with the staff."

Thorne whistled. "You *are* an idiot."

"A first-rate idiot." Guy resumed pacing. "But Octavia is capable of handling anything her own way, if Mother and I will allow her



enough grace to make mistakes and learn on her own. I made enough mistakes after I became the duke, and my mother didn't point out every flaw of mine or wince at every mistake."

"I don't imagine that's your only problem," Thorne said, leaning against the statue of Athena and inspecting his fingernails. He glanced up. "You keep telling us to investigate matters thoroughly at the embassy. So, as your advisor, I'm asking you—what *else* have you done?"

Guy stared at the statue of Aphrodite again and thought back to his mother's advice. "I don't make her feel like a goddess, even when she appears like one to me. She needs to know that I would choose her, that I would give *her* the golden apple, if I were Paris." He waved his hands. "I'm not a man of many words. I think all kinds of wonderful things about her, but I don't actually tell her. Do you understand?"

Thorne laughed. "Just tell her that. You live in the city named after the fated Greek lover, after all."

"But Paris loved Helen, not Aphrodite, so I can't take the metaphor too far."

Thorne stared at him. "You overthink things, Woodford. Just hand her an apple sometime and tell her what you told me. You have it easy. You can talk to her. I *can't* tell Clara anything. Either she ignores the compliment, or she wants to hit me. She's more comfortable when I *don't* praise her, especially in front of her parents, and she's always with them."

Guy considered him. "You know, that's sad. It says a lot about the way she was raised. Almost as sad as my attempts to praise Octavia."

Thorne tapped his head. "Now, that's wise." He pushed off the statue. "That makes my blood boil. The part about her parents." He grinned at Guy. "I can't help you with the other part. But you have my advice. Just say something. Anything. And stop trying so hard to say the perfect thing."

Was *that* what Guy needed to change? Should he compliment Octavia more?

Thorne looked at Aphrodite. "A woman should hear what kind of goddess she is, no matter who else is in the room."

"And what kind of goddess am I?" Lady Clara asked.

Thorne spun around. Lady Shelford, Octavia, and Lady Clara were stripping off their cloaks and handing them to the butler.

Shelford helped Lady Eleanor out of her cloak.

He grinned. "Good evening, goddesses. 'You walk in beauty like the night.'"

Lady Clara and Lady Shelford giggled.

But Guy wasn't ready to see Octavia. He'd been waiting for this moment all afternoon. He'd been waiting for weeks, but now that it had come, it felt too important. Words vanished from his mind, and Guy couldn't swallow. He needed to think of something to say. What if she continued to turn down his proposals?

Shelford strode forward. "Woodford. Good to see you, old man."

Guy cleared his throat, and everyone looked at him. "Welcome," he said. It was the best he could do.

He offered his arm. "Lady Shelford, Lady Octavia, may I escort you in to dinner?"

Behind him, Thorne whispered, "You look ravishing," to Lady Clara.

Octavia looked ravishing, too, but Guy couldn't say it now. It would seem insincere. But he wanted to tell her. But he would look like an idiot. Which he was.

Misery set in, even though he had Octavia on one arm and her mother on the other. Octavia barely touched him, and she held herself as stiffly as though she were made of glass.

Lady Shelford and her son carried the dinner conversation. With the two of them there, no one else needed to speak. Lady Clara and Lady Eleanor chimed in occasionally, and Thorne managed to fit in an anecdote or two. Octavia was quiet, and he wondered whether she was as miserable as he was.

They gathered in the drawing room afterward, and Guy brought out the *cartes de visite*. Lady Shelford grew quiet when she saw them. He wondered if he was due for another scolding, but her eyes seemed oddly misty.

"I need one of these," Shelford said. "Where can we get a picture of Eleanor taken?"

"Visit me in Paris again," Guy said. He frantically scrambled for a way to mention golden apples and Aphrodite and beauty and Paris, but somehow the metaphor wouldn't come together.

Lady Clara exclaimed over her own photo, which was almost scandalously beautiful. "But my shoulders and my loose hair."

Lady Shelford waved a hand. "It's *French*. If you had the portrait taken in England, it would be one thing, but it was taken by Disdéri

himself. It's a work of art, not a photograph."

"All the same," Lady Clara said, "I would appreciate it, if no one showed this picture to my parents."

"You look beautiful. Why would you hide this?" Thorne's earnest gaze was directed at Lady Clara. Her cheeks pinked.

"My parents don't understand art," she said. "Not the way you and Octavia do. I learned that at the Louvre."

"*You* are a work of art," Thorne said. The pink on Lady Clara's cheeks deepened to a bright red.

Octavia averted her eyes and stared at her own portrait. Once again, Thorne had upstaged him. Guy couldn't give any compliments that would sound sincere now.

He swallowed. He had to try. "I thought your portrait would be a disaster."

Shelford laughed loudly. "Woodford never minces words. Should I call him out, Octavia, for insulting your honor?"

Guy wished he could take the words back. He tried to correct himself and appealed to Octavia. "Do you remember how I made you laugh? I thought I had ruined your chance to get a portrait made, but I love the way he captured your smile and the sparkle in your eyes. It's not a disaster at all." Mentally he shook himself. It still sounded idiotic.

Octavia studied the photo and handed it to Eleanor.

"Yes," Lady Shelford said. "He's captured her very essence. It's stunning."

"It's like looking into her soul," Guy said. "I've had it on my desk ever since it arrived."

Octavia's eyes shot up. "How long have you had these?"

"A week or so. It was a great consolation when they arrived, because I missed you so much."

Her lips pinched together, and Guy pushed the other pictures across the table. The two of them standing together. The group of friends, but his hand on her shoulder.

"Yes, I saw those," Octavia said, and she pushed them back.

"But these are copies for you to keep," Guy said. He slid them across the table again, and she pushed them over to Eleanor, who slid them across the table to Percy.

Lady Shelford pocketed them. "Octavia hardly reaches your shoulder."

"But you look well together," Lady Clara said.

"They do," Eleanor agreed. She smiled at Guy. "I've always thought they would."

Thorne glanced at Shelford, who seemed completely at ease with the exchange, then looked at Guy and arched an eyebrow. The fact that Guy had once tried to court Eleanor didn't seem to bother Shelford, even if it still felt a little awkward for Guy at times.

Octavia glared at her and rose from her seat. "Thank you for a lovely dinner."

"You're not leaving already?" Thorne asked, glancing at Lady Clara.

Octavia nodded her head curtly, and her fair curls bounced around her perfect complexion. "We're leaving."

"We are?" Shelford asked. "Why? Woodford's got comfortable couches."

Lady Shelford shifted in her seat and rearranged her skirt. "If you're ready to go, then *you* can call the carriage. I would like to stay."

Octavia paled. "Me?"

Shelford laughed loudly. "Go ahead, sister."

"Very well." Octavia turned to Guy and smiled.

"No," he said. "I won't fetch it for you. We're not engaged. I don't owe you any favors. Remember? You don't want my help."

The smile faded, and Octavia looked around the drawing room. No one offered to call the carriage. Shelford settled deep into a sofa next to Eleanor. "Parlor games, anyone? Charades, perhaps?"

"You can talk to Bance yourself." He smirked at her. She wouldn't dare.

She glared at him, but a hint of desperation and pleading danced behind the anger.

Guy sighed. "I'll come with you."

Octavia stalked out of the room, muttering something about her blasted mother under her breath.

Guy sprang from his chair and ran after her, trying to catch what she said about him.

"You give in to her too easily," Shelford shouted after him. "You always have!"

"Bance!" Octavia shouted as soon as she left the drawing room. "Bance! Where the deuce are you?"

"When did you adopt this language?" Guy asked. "It's new, isn't it?"

Octavia looked around the entrance. "When did you ask guests to retrieve their own carriages? When did my mother and brother and sister-in-law all change sides?"

"Whoa, whoa." Guy laid a hand on her arm, gently, in case she wheeled around on him. "We're not at war."

Octavia lifted her chin. "Aren't we? I know you can hear me, Bance. Call the confounded carriage, or so help me, I will march down to the stables and drive the blasted vehicle home myself!"

She was shaking. Guy searched her face. He wanted to wrap her in a hug and tell her everything would be fine, but he knew it wasn't. "Are you that desperate to escape me?"

"And more!" She ripped his hand off her arm and ran to the front doors. She tugged at the heavy handles and tried to pull the enormous doors open.

Guy shouted, "Bance!" and the butler appeared. "Call the Shelfords' carriage, if you please." How had things come to this? Was she really this hurt and angry?

Octavia looked lost, standing alone in the enormous entryway. She wrapped her arms around her middle, then she glanced over at him. Just one look, but it was enough for him to see.

She wasn't angry. She was scared.

Guy went and gently put a hand on her arm. He led her to a marble bench between two statues. "We can wait here. It will only be a few more minutes."

Octavia still shook. He tipped her head onto his shoulder. When she didn't object, he wrapped an arm lightly around her. It felt so right to have her in the circle of his arms again and comfort her. They sat together as the shaking subsided. Guy gently stroked her hands, and Octavia pushed herself away.

"Don't ask me to marry you again," she said. "For the fourth time, the answer is still—"

Guy ran his thumb along the ridge of her forefinger, then turned her hand over and traced circles on her palm. "I let you down. I failed you. You were my wife—"

"Wife-to-be," Octavia said.

"And I did not do everything in my power to ensure your happiness or your success, especially at the embassy. I was so relieved not to have to hear Mother droning on about menus that I neglected to help you or ensure the staff gave you the respect you deserve."

Octavia threw him a quick glance.

"Mother told me she interfered, and that wouldn't happen if we were married. You would be the duchess, and there would be no question who had the authority to make decisions."

She continued to let him play with her fingers. He raised them to his lips and kissed the finger pads gently, one at a time. "I want another chance."

Octavia didn't say anything.

"I'm proud of you," Guy said. "You can be your own kind of duchess, and you don't have to explain yourself or apologize. People love you. I love you."

"Even though I humiliated myself in front of the queen?" she whispered. "I should explain myself to her."

Guy brought her hands to his lips and kissed each one. "Do you know what she said the next day during our first meeting?"

Octavia rested her head gently on his shoulder. "I'm afraid to ask."

"I'm not sure why you're scared, Octavia, but I can see your fear." He dipped his head down to try to catch her eye. When she still avoided him, he tipped her chin toward him. "And I want you to feel like you're always safe with me. You can make mistakes, and that doesn't mean you're failing. It means you're trying."

Her face was unreadable. The weight settled in his heart, and he sighed. "The queen asked me how soon you would be ready to be one of her ladies-in-waiting. When our wedding date was and how long we intended to stay at the embassy in France."

Octavia gasped and finally met his gaze. The pull between them was stronger than ever, but Guy knew he could not rush her this time. He exerted all his self-control not to kiss her, whether or not her eyes were misty. Whether or not her chin wobbled.

"I told her that I needed you all to myself for a few years before we could move to London," Guy whispered. "I love you, and I treated you poorly. I'm ashamed, and I want to do better. You should never doubt how much I admire you. You should tire of hearing me extoll your virtues so often that it embarrasses you."

"You say and do kind things, too," Octavia said.

"Yelverton says that I bluster."

She didn't deny that he'd hurt her. She didn't reassure him or promise that she felt safe near him. She wouldn't suddenly trust herself now that he'd said he trusted her. She studied her hands

silently.

Bance drew open the doors. "The carriage is ready."

Guy nodded. He was desperate for one more minute with her. He waved to his butler to wait. "The queen's visit to Versailles was a huge success. She and the emperor have never had a better relationship." He tried to catch her eye again, but she turned her head. "I don't think you saw any of that. I don't think you really even saw Versailles, even though you were there."

Octavia glanced at him for one precious moment.

"Will you think about what I said, about giving me a second chance? Who will run the embassy like a hotel, if you do not? Who will help me carry my burdens? Who will glean all the gossip from Estelle? It's not the same without you there. I need you, exactly as you are."

Her eyes dropped to the floor, and she did not respond. Reluctantly, he left Octavia on the bench and dragged himself along the hallway to the drawing room. Lady Clara was deep in conversation with Thorne, and he hesitated.

Shelford called across the drawing room. "She got her way, didn't she? You can never tell her 'no.'"

"She, on the other hand, is adept at using the word." Guy sighed. "The carriage will be here soon."

Lady Shelford crossed the room to join him. "I suppose you couldn't change her mind."

Guy studied her face. "Do you want me to?"

"Yes. She's so young," Lady Shelford said quietly, then lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. "But no younger than I was or than most women are when they marry."

Lady Shelford accompanied him to the front doors, where Octavia waited beside the statue of Hestia, goddess of hearth and home. The irony twisted in his gut, and he fought down his frustration.

Lady Clara smiled at Thorne, but Octavia evaded Guy's attempt to catch her eye. She traced her fingers along the statue's plinth.

"Thank you," Lady Shelford said a bit too loudly and too stiffly. "It was a lovely dinner." She sent Octavia a sidelong glance, as if trying to prompt a wayward child, but Octavia still refused to bid him farewell.

"Yes, Guy, it was so good to see you," Eleanor said. "We'll visit you in Paris again as soon as we can travel without Spencer

harming himself or the horses.”

“So, never,” Shelford said.

Eleanor smiled. “But know that we’re thinking of you and wishing we could visit.”

“Keep my godson out of mischief,” Guy said. “I am eager to meet him tomorrow. Good evening, all of you.”

Everyone else answered him, except Octavia. She stared at him, as if hovering between two choices. Guy crossed the entryway and spoke quietly enough that only she could hear him. “Mother ordered a new blend of tea after I finally confessed that I didn’t like hers. Twenty-nine years of drinking it. See what good you could do for England? You’ve already saved every visitor to the embassy from that awful tea.”

Octavia glanced up at him. “I’m pleased.” But her mind seemed miles away. A crease furrowed her brow, and she traced a line along the edge of the marble plinth again. “Lady-in-waiting?”

Guy stilled her hands, then held them close. “The queen wasn’t angry. She agrees that Buckingham has a drab exterior. She says our splendor lies inside. And I quite agree.” He drew Octavia’s hands close to his heart. “You’re magnificent, inside and out.”

Octavia dropped his hands. “Buckingham could use a touch of color. A blue roof would do it, and I liked the gold at Versailles. I also liked the shrubbery.” She turned to leave without saying farewell.



# Chapter 30

The week that followed was one of the most painful of her life. Octavia had to endure a relentless campaign of perfection. Guy said and did all the right things to tear down her defenses stone by stone, until she stood in a pile of rubble. He promised that he loved her always, forever, and no matter what, and she believed him.

But no matter what he said or promised, he couldn't change the fact that she was inherently flawed. He was so worried about improving his own faults that he continued to overlook the obvious.

She was twelve years younger than him.

And she would always say and do inappropriate things, regardless of her love for him. She never planned to do things. They just...happened.

It was well that the queen had laughed this once, but Octavia might not always be so lucky.

If she knew that she would humiliate him again, she could never feel safe. He couldn't protect her from herself, so she scrambled to rebuild the wall around her heart, pebble by pebble.

Guy came to bid her farewell. "We report to the Foreign Office tomorrow," he said. "I have a matter to complete." He glanced at Thorne.

Clara's eyes widened. "Does it relate to you?"

Thorne shook his head. "Nothing to worry about. I've agreed to stay at the embassy a while longer. Just a formality. A bit of paperwork."

Clara smiled at him. "I'll miss talking to you, Reggie."

Thorne grinned. "Paris won't be the same without you."

Octavia twisted her hands together. This was it. She'd never see Guy again. Or it would be years. Or he would marry someone else. Guy's cloudless eyes gazed into hers, begging her to relent. He slapped his traveling gloves against his palm.

He was really leaving. Grief choked her throat, and she couldn't force enough air into her lungs.

"Safe journey," Octavia managed. Her head spun, and her eyes could no longer focus on Guy and everything she was losing.

“Excuse me.”

She bolted out the front door and stumbled down the steps.

“Octavia!” Mama yelled after her.

She started down one of the walking paths. She picked up her skirt and petticoats and ran. She ran faster and faster, as fast as she could. She ran until she couldn’t breathe. The rocks jabbed her feet through the thin slippers, but she kept running.

She should have worn boots, but she never thought things through. She simply acted.

Octavia reached the bridge that divided her estate from Guy’s, and she sank onto the cool grass by the willow, resting her head against the tree. She heaved great breaths, covered her head with both arms, and let the tears flow.

Sunlight shot through the tree’s canopy, and the willow leaves rustled in the breezes.

“I hate it when you cry.” Guy’s voice penetrated her grief. She could hear him panting, as if he had run to catch her.

Octavia couldn’t stop the sobs. “I’m sorry to disappoint you again.”

“No!” Guy wrapped his arm around her. “You aren’t a disappointment or a headache or unsuitable.”

He drew her into a hug, and she let herself cry on his shoulder. “I’m too young, and I embarrass you.”

“Then I’m an idiot,” Guy said. “If you feel like anything less than a goddess around me, I’m an imbecile. You are witty and clever and magnificent.”

Octavia hiccupped a laugh and continued crying.

“Really,” Guy said. He tilted her chin up toward him. “I love you. Right now. You’re just right, right now.”

“You’ll miss your train,” Octavia said.

“Thorne is going without me. He can—complete the paperwork—on his own. You’re more important. Haven’t I been telling you that all week?”

Octavia drew a shuddering breath. “It doesn’t change who I am.”

Guy stroked her hair. “Everyone loves you. You inspire loyalty. You paint and draw and sing and speak three languages. You massage my worries away, and you put up with my idiocy. You are perfectly imperfect, and I adore you.”

“I blurt things out. I asked Clara if she kissed Thorne.”

"Which she did. Your instincts were right. I daresay she's kissed him again this week. They could have been engaged by now, if you would have helped them along."

"I hug people I shouldn't hug."

"You should hug *me*."

Octavia swatted him. "I am hugging you. I meant Yelverton and Rushworth and Thorne."

"And I'm still going to ask you to marry me, because I'm the one holding you right now." Guy pulled back to look at her. "I miss talking to you and losing chess games and watching you play with Pharaoh. I want to share everything with you. I want you to manage the household again, so I can attend to diplomatic concerns. Even selecting curtains is important, when England has an image to maintain, remember. Didn't you tell me something like that?"

Octavia turned away.

Guy tightened his embrace. "You cannot embarrass yourself when you redecorate the embassy or select menus or instruct gardeners. You've got every skill you need to be a duchess, and more. I'm not letting go until I get the answer I want."

Octavia laughed. "You forget that I know self-defense."

Guy straightened and let go. She sat up, suddenly cold.

This time, it was his chin quivering. "Really? Your answer is still no." He pushed off the ground and brushed off his pants. His smile didn't reach his eyes. "I might be able to catch the train to London."

Panic made her vision narrow, and her head ached. He couldn't leave.

Guy studied her, and the sadness stretched between them, filling every space. "I've really lost you, haven't I?" He started to back away. "I will miss you, Octavia."

Her ankle moved by instinct, tripping his foot. She swept his leg out from beneath him, and Guy collapsed into the hard dirt, landing on an exposed tree root.

He rubbed his backside. "What was that for?"

Octavia took a deep breath. He wasn't going anywhere. "You didn't wait for my answer."

He lounged on his side in the grass, one arm beneath his head, smirking at her. His expression seemed half-hopeful and half-afraid. "What's your answer?"

She laughed. The ground steadied her shaking legs. "Yes, I'll

marry you." She grinned at him. "I'll be the death of you." She tried to push his arm out from beneath his head, but he caught her wrist and pulled her toward him. "As long as you understand that."

"No, my darling," he said. "You bring me to life." He glanced around. "Did your mother follow me?"

The grass stains would ruin this dress. He was worth it. He was worth every dress in Paris. She leaned in. "I certainly hope not."

Guy tucked her into his side. "And Lady Clara?"

"Probably pining for Thorne in her room. Percy and Eleanor?"

"I fully intended to chase you anyway."

"And did they follow you?" Octavia paused. "No, they'd never bring Spencer anywhere near the stream. Besides, you know they're on your side. So, which one actually told you to follow me?"

"Eleanor told me to chase you, or I'd never see my godson again."

Octavia smiled. "So, you're here because Eleanor interfered?"

"I already had one foot in the air. Truly. I had nearly reached the next step before she pushed me down the entire flight of stairs."

Octavia enjoyed the feeling of sitting near him again. "You cannot resist my wobbly chin. Of course you would have come."

Guy smirked at her. "And I ran after you all this way. Now, can I finally have a few minutes alone with my wife?"

Octavia ran her hands up his arms and around his neck. "We're not married yet."

"Oh, I can get a special license this afternoon, and we'll arrange the marriage settlement later since Shelford is here. I'm not taking any more chances with you. Wedding today, France tomorrow."

Octavia shook her head. "People will gossip. They'll say..." She rubbed her stomach. "You know. That we only married because I was expecting a child."

Guy threw back his head and laughed. He puffed out his chest. "I'm the Duke of Woodford, and I don't honestly care what anyone says about me." He ran a hand tenderly over her face and cupped her cheek. "Would the gossip bother you?"

Octavia snorted. "Let me see. Wait four or five months to marry you because you're in France and my brother is in England and telegrams are expensive and marriage contracts are impossibly complicated, or marry you this week and cause an uproar." A grin slowly covered her face.

"So—special license?" Guy asked. "It won't be nearly as

scandalous as you're hoping. We're hardly the first to marry that way, and we have very logical reasons."

Octavia laughed and rested her back against the bark of the willow. The dress was already ruined. "Definitely get a special license, then, *even though* it's a logical choice for an overseas diplomat who's only in town a short while." She tilted her head to see Guy better. "And could you get one for Thorne, while you're talking to the archbishop?"

"What makes you think he'd be able to use it?"

Octavia pursed her lips as she remembered Clara's stricken face in the carriage as they left Paris. "Clara is my friend. We've had enough talks this week that I feel certain it might be useful."

Guy groaned and traced the shape of her mouth. "I cannot think when you do that."

She grinned and pursed her lips again. "Do what?"

He ran his arm around her waist. "And Lady Clara's parents? How do they feel?"

Octavia pushed herself off the ground. "Let's get you to a train station. We could have been married by now." She offered him a hand, but he pulled her back down. She curled into his side and rested her head on his shoulder. "I believe I've finally convinced the Prouttons to let her marry a man without a title."

"Have you?" Guy said, wrapping her in his arms and resting his chin on her head. "That's funny."

"Why?" Octavia asked, as she began to trace circles on the back of his neck.

"Because that's what he's gone to London to do—become an earl."

# Chapter 31

Water gently trickled over the pebbles and stones of the stream. Octavia rested in the circle of Guy's arms beneath the willow and tilted her head onto his shoulder.

"Why so quiet?" he asked.

The stillness of the spring morning soothed her. "I'm thinking about trimming hedges and ordering éclairs and selecting wallpaper, and I cannot help wondering if I'm really right for the life you want me to live."

Guy brushed a curl from the side of her face.

The serenity of the stream and the rustling of the grass whispered peace. "Convince me that I am capable, when every circumstance has proven me wrong."

He ran a thumb along her cheek. "I cannot make you believe in yourself, and I cannot make you feel safe, and I cannot make you understand how deeply I love you. Only you can feel those things for yourself." His aquamarine eyes flashed with determination. "I will do everything in my power to help you succeed. I will listen to every dish on every menu, if you want. I will pace every inch of the embassy to determine wallpaper colors, if you want my help. I will *not* throw all my unwanted business to you and leave you alone to deal with the mundane tasks." He toyed with the curl again. "I will stay out of your way and watch you be a brilliant hostess, a charming conversationalist, and a master of intrigue. Or a mistress." He grinned. "I choose you now and every time, I promise. No matter what you do or say. But we could cut back on the Yelverton hugs."

Octavia nestled into him.

"But hug away, if that's what you need to do. I choose you, Octavia Shelford, today. And if hugs make you happy, hug Rushworth and Thorne and *me*."

Octavia swatted him. She knew he liked to tease, and she enjoyed being able to tease him in return. He had always been there, her whole life, encouraging her and challenging her. "Sometimes I want *you* to make the decisions. I want you to get in

my way with the banal tasks. I don't care one fig whether the wall hangings are ecru or beige."

Guy leaned his head against the tree and laughed. "Does *anyone* truly care? Yes, darling, take your wings and fly. Someone has to decide. I chose you. You choose the lampshades." He wrapped his arms tightly around her. "I don't want to make those decisions, either, but I won't leave you to face the architect and gardener alone anymore. Unless you want to."

"You're suffocating me."

"I'm giving you your freedom. Decorate the embassy however you see fit."

"No. I mean, I can hardly breathe right now."

"Then move closer." Guy smirked at her, then he darted a glance at her arms and let go. "I forgot. You know—things."

"Self-defense. Basic boxing." Octavia grinned at him. "We can practice the exercises together after we're married. Perhaps I'll install an indoor gymnasium at the embassy, like the Kemptons." She scooted closer to him, not caring if her gown got more dirt on it. "But thank you for your trust in my ability to select upholstery."

"And pastries," Guy said, draping an arm around her shoulder again. "And shrubberies."

"The life of a duchess is entirely mundane," Octavia complained. "You must let me read the missives and advise you on important matters, not just draperies." Hours of embroidery was boring enough, but running a household promised to be equally stifling.

Guy wrapped his other arm around her. "I trust you to make far more important decisions than which pudding to serve, and I'll let you read anything you want, if you'll put it back in the same drawer every time, so I can find it. I don't care which drawer. Reorganize my office, if you wish."

Octavia grinned at him. "Agreed."

"I'm sure it's easy to get bored, because you are so intelligent. The day-to-day routine wears on me, too, but I'll make it up to you. I already have an elaborate gift to thank you for rescuing me from conversations about colors of paint."

"What?" Octavia asked. The twinkle in Guy's eye intrigued her.

"Not now," Guy said. "I'll tell you in October. Late October, I think."

"October?" Octavia stared at him. "It's early May. You expect me to wait almost six months for a surprise?"

“Yes,” Guy said. His face hovered above hers. “When we go on our honeymoon.” He dipped his head down and covered her lips with his own.

She forgot everything as sensations exploded inside her. The birdsong faded and nothing existed except his embrace. His warmth enfolded her in the shade of the spring morning, and she lost herself in happiness.

“Not slowing down,” Guy muttered. “Finally. Speeding up.”

Octavia giggled. “I like being engaged again.”

“And I’m glad I missed the train,” Guy said, resting his head on hers. He tilted his head to the side, and his lips found hers again. Sunshine peeked through the canopy of the tree, and a breeze tickled her neck.

Octavia sighed. “But you do have an appointment with the queen. Thorne needs your support. The archbishop is in London, and we cannot get a special license without him. Clara needs me.” She bit her lip. “I have so much to do to plan the wedding.” Her mind began to race as excitement flooded her.

Guy waved his hand at the landscape in front of him. “Not so fast. This is our life together. We must snatch the rare moments of tranquility amid the bustle of duty.”

“But we are not doing this alone. We have our mothers to help us.”

Guy swallowed. “If you want them. You are ready to be my duchess on your own.” He caught her eye, and Octavia nodded. She knew he trusted her, and she was ready to accept the challenge.

A teasing glint entered his eye. “But don’t overlook your terror of a nephew. He may be quite useful in fifteen years.”

Octavia grinned. “A high compliment from someone who calls all of his assistants useless.”

Guy groaned. “They’re far less incompetent than they used to be. I almost like them now.”

Octavia nestled into his side. “Well, Spencer will never be like them. He’s a Shelford, and he will be magnificent.” She sat up to make sure Guy understood that she meant the next part. “Of course I want my family around me. Where else would they go? We cannot leave our mothers alone. Mama is always with me, and Percy and Eleanor must visit as often as Spencer allows them.”

Guy offered Octavia his hand, and they rose. “So, never, as Shelford said.” He tucked her arm into his side, and they began to



stroll home. "My mother wondered if you'd prefer to do things on your own, without two interfering old crones around."

"Those are your words, not hers." Octavia laid her head against his shoulder as they ambled along the lane. "I need all the help I can get, and they need us."

"My thoughts exactly." Guy wrapped his hand around hers. "So do Thorne and Lady Clara. They need you to help them get engaged. If they didn't manage it on their own this week, they never will."



\* \* \*

Octavia broke the news to Mama, and she began weeping again. Clara wrapped her in a hug. Guy and Percy left for London on the afternoon train, and Eleanor bustled around shouting orders and preparing to return to London while holding Spencer on one hip. "Thank goodness for crinoline hoops," she said. "He can't crawl too far down with those in the way."

Once again, Octavia had thrown the household into an uproar. She had the maids frantically packing her few dresses and unmentionables to return to France after her last-minute wedding in London.

"You're coming to London with me. You're my maid of honor," Octavia informed Clara. "And then I hope you'll come back to France with me."

Clara laughed. "I cannot go with you everywhere."

"Why not?" Octavia contemplated the old dresses in her wardrobe. "Which of these would make the best wedding dress? I've been gone a year, and everything is out of fashion. Should I wear one of the newer dresses from France? I wish I'd brought more with me."

"Isn't the dowager Duchess of Woodford coming from Paris for the wedding? She could bring anything you wanted from your old rooms. I daresay they haven't been packed yet."

Octavia grinned at her. "You see. It's like having my own lady-in-waiting. You must return to France with me. I cannot do without

you.”

Clara shook her head. “My parents—”

“—do not want you to have another Season which will cause great expense and potential embarrassment. They will not object if you are the dearest friend of a duchess instead.”

Clara considered.

“Unless you’d rather return to your estate,” Octavia said. “Do you miss home?”

Clara rifled through the dresses in the wardrobe and held up a dark blue one. “I haven’t seen it in a while.”

She put the blue dress back and took out a pale peach dress, then a cream one, then a frilly lace dress. “Traditional white perhaps?”

Octavia held the dress up and studied herself in the mirror. “Is there anything, or anyone, you miss in your neighborhood?”

Clara’s cheeks took on a pink tinge. “Thorne has gone to London. I wonder if he’s come back to England to stay. He’s been away from his estate for a while, and perhaps he needs to—”

“He doesn’t.” Octavia shoved the dress back in the wardrobe. “That dress looks too young. I need something more refined and eye-catching. Something a bit more elegant. Do I have anything ecru?” She bit her lip to hold back a smile.

“Ecru? Is that a color?” Clara dug through the dresses. “Your maid will not be pleased with us when she sees the mess we’ve made.”

Dresses were strewn across the bed. “Yes, but everything has to be packed or given away anyway. Thorne is returning to France immediately after the wedding. He’s indispensable to Guy and the Foreign Office now.” Octavia said it casually, but she watched Clara’s reaction in the mirror.

Clara dug to the back of the wardrobe and pulled out the ideal dress. “This. I don’t know what color it is. Barely off-white, and the train is longer than a wedding dress.”

Octavia sighed. She held it up and twirled in circles. “I wore this when I was presented at Court. It cost more than a wedding dress.”

“Look at the lace,” Clara fingered the layers of intricate ruffles.

“And Guy escorted me with Percy. They had to wait outside for hours. He was only here for three weeks before he returned to the embassy.” She hugged the dress to her chest. “I cannot imagine a more perfect dress, even if I’d had time to order one.”

Clara gently laid the dress on the bed.

Octavia sat at her dressing table. "So, my lady-in-waiting. *You* are indispensable to me. Have you decided how my maid will do my hair? And what dress *you* will wear? And whether you will accompany me and live in Europe?"

"I don't make decisions quickly," Clara said.

Octavia played with the brush on her table. "That's going to be a problem," she mumbled.

"Pardon?" Clara asked. "I didn't catch that."

Octavia smiled. "Let's go pack your things and select an equally lovely gown for you."

## Chapter 32

Thorne insisted on meeting the train himself. "She can't hear the news from anyone else. I have to speak with her first." He paced up and down the crowded platform. "You swear you haven't told anyone."

"It's a matter of public record. We were not the only people there." Guy clapped him on the back. "I doubt anyone wired a telegram to tell her, but Lady Shelford seems to know everything before it happens."

Thorne swore.

Shelford laughed and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "My mother has remarkable instincts, and Octavia probably told her not to say anything."

Thorne paced back up the platform. His head swiveled toward the enormous clock at one end of the station. "They should have been here."

Guy understood his impatience. "Part of me is afraid Octavia will decide not to come," he admitted.

Thorne scoffed and ran a hand through his tousled hair.

"Stop worrying," Shelford said. "You're going to be my brother soon. Think of that. Can you imagine anything better?" He nudged him in the ribs. "You'll always have me around. Day and night. Every holiday. Dropping in to visit when you least expect it. It's going to be great to have an older brother."

Guy scowled at him. "I'm still not telling you where I'm taking her on the honeymoon, and you and Eleanor are not coming with us."

Shelford dropped his arm. "It's not until October. Spencer will be old enough to leave with my mother by then."

"No." Guy scanned the tracks for any sign of a train. He turned to Thorne. "You asked Lord Proutton?" Guy asked.

Thorne nodded. "I had to tell him. He said it didn't affect his decision. *Ha*. But as long as he approves, I cannot begrudge him. He's consenting to a special license, after all. Never believed a curmudgeon like him would agree to it."

Guy would never tell Thorne that he had personally contacted Proutton to “congratulate” him and remind him how important Thorne’s work was. Proutton was savvy. Thorne had long been the toast of the town, and now he was the newest earl and a favorite of the queen.

“I couldn’t live with myself if Clara only married me for the title,” Thorne said.

A whistle sounded, and the squeal of brakes ended their conversation. A Jenny Lind engine pulled into the station, and Guy watched for Octavia to disembark.

“Steady,” he yelled to Thorne over the hubbub of arriving passengers and the scraping of luggage trolleys on stone.

Eleanor rushed to Shelford’s side, and Guy felt the familiar stab of jealousy at seeing a happy couple when he wasn’t married himself. Spencer wrapped his baby arms around Shelford’s neck, and a new sort of jealousy erupted.

Then Octavia flung her arms around him, completely unaware of her impropriety, and Guy embraced her. He was the Duke of Woodford, and he did not explain himself—or his duchess—to anyone. Eventually, he disentangled himself and gently wrapped her arm around his. Lady Shelford nodded at him. No glares or grimaces this time.

Guy drank in the sight of his future bride. “I’m so glad to see you.”

Octavia’s eyes were fixed on a point ahead of her. “Shh.”

He watched Lady Clara playing with her lace reticule. She was obviously flustered. “Reggie.”

“Clara. How was your ride?”

“Smoky and hot. My hair is disheveled, and I think cinders blew onto us from the engine.” She laughed.

Thorne brushed something off her shoulder, and her eyes flew to his. He leaned forward and picked a fleck of something from her hair. “Soot looks lovely on you.”

Lady Clara gasped and dug for a handkerchief. She wiped her face. “Is there really? Where?”

“Just a bit.” He took the handkerchief and brushed her cheek, then returned the handkerchief to her.

Octavia whispered to Guy, “This is excruciating to watch.” She giggled. “Do something diplomatic.”

Guy ran through ideas in his head. Nothing came to mind.

Shelford and Eleanor were deep in conversation. He looked helplessly at Octavia.

“Quickly,” Octavia whispered. “Tea.”

*Of course.* “Will you join us for some refreshments at my townhouse?”

Thorne and Lady Clara stopped their conversation long enough to answer in the affirmative.

“Shall we?” Octavia herded the group over to Guy’s London carriage. “I’ll see you soon, Percy. Eleanor. Mama.” She hugged Spencer. “I’ll keep this one.”

Shelford laughed. “Please. Shall I give you the list of instructions for my son?”

Spencer tugged at the topmost row of tassels on Octavia’s dress, and one came off. She handed the toddler back to her brother. “I will be at the townhouse in an hour or two. I’m stopping for afternoon tea with Guy. I suppose I can wait to see my nephew until then.”

Percy grinned and held Spencer out toward Guy. “Sure you don’t need a pint-sized chaperone?”

Spencer reached for the handkerchief in Guy’s coat pocket, tore it out, and shoved it into his mouth.

Guy gave Percy a look that would have intimidated anyone else. Anyone except a member of the Shelford family. “Quite certain.” He deepened the scowl, even though he didn’t mean it.

Percy laughed loudly and waved a cheery farewell. “See you later. But not *too* much later.” He winked at Guy and Octavia, then disappeared into his own carriage.

Octavia looked so natural, sitting in his townhome, pouring the tea for guests. She put everyone at ease with her lively conversation while he brooded over a way to help Thorne and Lady Clara spend a few minutes alone.

He should have known that Octavia would figure that out, too. She had managed to get Lady Clara and Thorne on the same seat in the carriage and onto the same sofa during the tea service.

A surge of pride filled him, and he discreetly shifted closer to her on the sofa. He loved her tender, shamelessly interfering heart.

“Did you know that Guy has one of the largest private gardens in London? The Woodfords have had this townhome for so long, and I’ve always loved it. It’s like an oasis in the desert.”

Thorne laughed. "London isn't as bad as all that. I don't know that I'd call it a 'desert.'"

Octavia leveled a gaze at him. "The gardens are lovely to explore. Quite extensive."

Guy cleared his throat. "Octavia loves everything about Egypt, so naturally, she'd call it an oasis. Really, it's an overgrown, secluded spot to wander around and get lost..." He inclined his head slightly toward Lady Clara. "A bit unruly and unkempt in places."

Thorne seemed to finally catch on. "Oh. Yes. Just the place for me."

"I should like to examine the hedges and see how your gardeners are trimming them. I could compare them to the embassy and Versailles," Octavia said. "Anyone else care to stretch their legs for a bit?" She glanced at Lady Clara.

"I'll join you," Lady Clara said. "Sitting in the train has cramped my legs. I'd love a walk."

Thorne accompanied Guy out of the room. "I can't do it," he muttered. "Where do I start? What do I say?"

Guy opened the glass doors that led to the gardens. "Would you like Octavia to do it for you?"

Thorne snorted. "Never mind. I'll find a way." He threw back his head and sauntered ahead. "Clara, may I join you?"

Guy and Octavia waited at the edge of the gardens for a respectable amount of time. "Am I their chaperone?" he asked. "Are they lost?"

She leaned against him. "It's a good thing if it's taking a long time."

"Yes, but not too long," Guy said.

Octavia laughed. "No one knows but us, and we've done far more scandalous things. They always turned a blind eye."

Guy scanned the hedges for any sign of movement.

"I like the hedges best at Versailles," Octavia said. "I'll tell the gardeners that."

He smiled at her. "Excellent. Mother can be here in three days. Is that soon enough?"

Octavia traced the line of his jaw and kissed him on the cheek. "No, but I'll wait."

Guy turned toward her inviting eyes. He moved an arm behind her on the bench. "I hope they take a long, long time to sort things

out.”

“They didn’t,” Octavia said, and she pointed to the east side of the gardens.

Guy sighed. “I need to establish a few mutually beneficial ground rules with my undersecretary.”

They left the bench to greet the couple. Lady Clara rushed forward to take Octavia’s hands.

“Are you coming with me to France?” Octavia asked, and Lady Clara nodded. “Oh good! I know the head of the embassy, and we can arrange very comfortable living quarters for you and your new husband.”

Lady Clara’s face fell. “Husband?”

“Thorne. You dolt. Haven’t you proposed yet?” Octavia took Guy’s arm and dragged him toward a particularly overgrown line of hedges. “I am so sorry, Clara. I am going to leave you alone for five minutes, and there had better be an engaged couple here when I return. I planned a double wedding, and I don’t want to be disappointed.”

Guy laughed. “I told you Octavia would propose for you, if you didn’t.” He tucked Octavia’s arm into his.

As soon as they had taken a few turns in the maze, Octavia collapsed in a fit of giggles. She grasped both of Guy’s lapels and gazed up at him. “Why are you marrying me? Do you hear the things I say? What did I just do?”

“You helped Thorne. The idiot.” He grinned down at her. “I told you Thorne would never get engaged without you, and I am so proud of you. And what shall we do with our five minutes? I believe you just won a forfeit. I officially concede the bet. Lady Clara and Thorne seem to be in love at last.”

Her eyes widened. “Yelverton! And Rushworth! They need my help, too.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. The embassy is not turning into a second location for the London Season.”

Octavia’s eyes grew even larger. “I hate the Season. But so many people need my help. Look at Thorne, and I thought *he* was fairly competent. Yelverton will be a disaster without me.”

“No.” Guy tried to use his most repressive voice. His duke voice. The one that worked on everyone except her. “Any forfeit but that.”

Octavia ran her fingers up his collar and skimmed them along his neck. She played with his hair, then danced her fingers down to



his chest. She traced a line across his lips. "We'll have to return for a house party this Christmas."

She balanced on her tiptoes, and her lips were within reach.

"Just a few friends," Octavia whispered. Her hands were toying with his collar, and then she draped her arms around his neck. "Your hunting lodge. A warm fire. Spencer will not be invited."

"I hate it when I love you," Guy said. He groaned. "Once again, I concede. Invite as many friends as you wish. There are plenty of rooms. Do your matchmaking, as long as it's painless for everyone involved."

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

"You're in charge of the household," Guy said. He drew her close. "Whatever makes you happy, Duchess. But I do think Eleanor might be helpful to have around, too." He thought of Spencer's arms around Shelford's neck and wondered how soon Octavia would be ready for children. He wouldn't rush her, though. "I wouldn't mind having my godson and nephew around. A child at Christmas, you know. An excuse to buy toys."

Octavia smiled. "You make me happy. You always have. But a Christmas house party with a few couples might also make me happy. And toys. And my nephew. And mistletoe."

Her lips met his, and he knew he would always agree to anything she asked him. When they broke apart, Octavia brushed his hair gently aside. "You don't hate loving me."

Guy smirked at her. "Oh, I *enjoy* loving you. I *love* having a wife. A lot." He glanced around the secluded section of the garden. "We still have three minutes left."

Octavia let go of him and slowly backed away one slow step at a time. "Then it's too bad that we're not married." She threw a saucy look over her shoulder. "Yet." She darted away.

Guy knew a challenge when he saw one. He darted forward. She screamed and ran faster, just as she had when she was younger. He knew every twist and turn of the maze-like gardens, and so did she. Flashes of fabric teased him as he tried to catch up to her. He heard shrieks and giggles.

He emerged, panting, from hedges in the further corner, just in time to grab Octavia by the waist and spin her around. "Caught you!"

She giggled and collapsed in his arms, her chest heaving to catch a breath.

“Yes, I love being in love with you,” Guy said. He held Octavia wrapped in his arms, and Thorne’s voice rang out from across the gardens.

“Double wedding!”

Guy had forgotten about Thorne and Lady Clara.

He let go of Octavia and straightened. He brushed his coat and arranged his collar. She tugged at her shirtwaist and tidied her hair.

Thorne laughed. “We look worse.”

They did.

Lady Clara clung to Thorne’s arm. Her dress was wrinkled in all the right places, and Thorne seemed content for the first time in months.

Octavia held out her hands to Lady Clara again. “Now you’re coming to Paris *and* you’re marrying Thorne?”

Lady Clara smiled.

“And you’ll be a countess!”

Lady Clara dropped Octavia’s hands and turned to Thorne. “What? Why?”

He gazed down at her, and his voice grew serious for one moment. “I had to know if you could love me...without a title.”

“Yes, Reggie. I do.” Lady Clara studied his face, as if searching for the lost piece of a puzzle.

“I’m the newest earl in England.” Thorne’s voice was almost apologetic.

Guy grinned at the pair. It hadn’t been hard to convince the queen that his wealthy undersecretary deserved a title for his loyalty, his diplomatic service overseas, and the potential of future financial contributions to the Crown. It had been harder to convince Thorne to accept the title and everything that came with it.

“The paperwork?” Lady Clara asked.

Thorne nodded. “I lied. I went to Court yesterday.”

Lady Clara shook her head. “Is there anything *else* Octavia should tell me before I marry you, Reggie?” She smiled up at him.

“I like dogs,” he said. “But you already know the worst about me.”

“And the best. Of course I loved you without a title,” Lady Clara said. “It was my papa who thought otherwise.”

Thorne led her toward the glass doors, and Guy followed them with Octavia on his arm. “Actually, he gave me permission for the duke to get a special license for us. The double wedding is in three

days. Octavia was serious.”

Lady Clara stopped. “Three days. A double wedding with a duke and duchess. By special license.” She swayed, and Thorne pulled her close.

He smiled. “And then we leave for France.”

“And Papa agreed to this?”

Thorne puffed out his chest. “Call it a miracle.”

Lady Clara and Octavia laughed.

“But you are my miracle,” Guy said to Octavia. “Every day I will thank God for you. My life would be empty without you. Twenty-nine years was long enough to wander in the wilderness without you.”

“Making me look bad,” Thorne muttered.

“Shall I tell Octavia about the golden apple and how I would choose to give it to her, if I were Paris? Because I do live in Paris, Octavia, and I choose you as the most beautiful, the wisest—”

“Oh, Guy.” Octavia melted into his side and gazed up at him. “You are the most I could ever hope for. I didn’t know you had a romantic side, too.”

“That’s not even fair,” Thorne said beneath his breath. “Stop.”

Guy grinned over at him. “Fine. We’re going to have a double wedding, aren’t we?”

Thorne creased his brow. “Yes...”

He glanced around the edge of the garden. They were nearly to the glass doors.

“Then why not practice the double kiss at the end?”

“I’m in favor of rehearsals,” Thorne said. He and Lady Clara moved away toward one side of the townhouse, and Octavia grabbed Guy’s hand. She tugged him toward the other side of the townhouse.

She settled her hands on either side of his coat lapels and gazed up at him. “You’re brilliant.”

“I love my wife,” Guy said.

Octavia grinned. “I love you, too.”

# Epilogue

“Merry Christmas, darling.” Octavia raised a cup of palm-wine and toasted her husband. She lounged on the deck of a steamer ship as it floated lazily down the Nile River toward Alexandria.

“You are the best present I’ve ever received.” Guy’s eyes ignited, and he smiled invitingly.

“I told you once that I’m not a prize.” Octavia dangled her hand over the edge of her deck chair to play with his fingers. He held his palm up, and she traced circles on it.

He closed his eyes, tipped his head back on the lounge chair, and sighed. “You drive me crazy in every possible good way.”

“I try.” Octavia took his hand and pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist.

Guy caught her hand and brought her fingers to his lips. He kissed each one slowly.

“It’s ten o’clock in the morning,” Octavia protested.

He arched an eyebrow. “The boat doesn’t arrive in Alexandria until after lunch.”

She picked up *A Handbook for Travellers in Egypt*. “We might have missed something the first time we were there. It’s our last chance before we return to Paris.”

“I paid Sir John to accompany us. The author himself is giving us our honeymoon tour.” Guy feathered kisses up her arm.

Octavia sucked in a breath. Guy grinned. “You haven’t tired of this yet, after nearly seven months of marriage?”

She dropped her book on a side table. “You arranged the trip of a lifetime for me. I’ve seen alabaster and granite quarries, the tombs of the kings and the queens, big and little oases, and the cataracts of the Nile. You can ask me for anything, and I will answer ‘yes.’”

Guy took a soft, pitted date and popped it into her mouth. She closed her eyes. “It’s like a soft treacle tart melting in my mouth, and they just grow on trees!”

Guy glanced around the empty deck. “I can ask you *anything*?”

Octavia smiled at him. She lowered her voice, and her eyes blazed. “Anything.”

“You would leave this idyllic deck and go below to our cabin with me, even though it’s our last day on the Nile, and the breeze is tickling your neck”—he drew his fingers across her bare skin—“and we only have a few more hours left in Egypt?”

Octavia’s chin wobbled, but the heat remained in her eyes. “Oh, yes.”

Guy brushed his fingers along the side of her face. He pressed a kiss to her lips. “This is what I want to ask you.” He leaned across her, took the book from the side table, and relaxed back in his chair. “Will you let me read to you?”

She blinked, then the heat in her eyes erupted to a full flame. She threw her arms around him and kissed him passionately, tipping her deck chair.

Guy steadied her, laughing. “That sounds like ‘yes.’”

Octavia watched the Nile from her chair, her eyes sweeping over the fishermen and grasses growing on the bank. She reached out to hold Guy’s hand, but he gripped the book. She settled for resting her hand on his shoulder. “Thank you. Thank you for the honeymoon, for Thebes and Cairo and Mount Sinai and Petra and Jerusalem and Nubia. This is the best Christmas present, the best wedding present, the best—”

Guy stopped her with a kiss. “Thank you for putting up with someone who mutters and makes a lot of mistakes and loves his wife more than he can say.”

Octavia arranged herself in the chair. “I’m glad we’re married now, so I can drive you crazy in *new* ways.” She traced her hands from his shoulders to his neck and played with the curve above the collar of his shirt. She ran her finger around the inside of his collar and along the line of his jaw.

Guy took a deep breath. He opened the book to her favorite chapter. She played with the button on his collar. He groaned. “Octavia...I love it when you drive me crazy.”

She closed the book and covered his hands with her own. “I have that chapter memorized. There’s something *else* I’d like to study.” She left her deck chair, threw him a saucy look over her shoulder, and disappeared down the stairs that led to their cabin.

Guy grinned and followed her, leaving the book forgotten on the deck. After all, an academic text was entirely unsuitable for the bedroom.

# Also by Lisa H. Catmull

## **An Inconvenient Grand Tour: Book 1 of the Victorian Grand Tour Series**

*She needs to hide. He's tired of being overlooked. It's going to be a long two years.*

Eleanor Barrington has one rule: don't draw attention to yourself. She has one goal: marry a Peer to protect her family. When her father decides on a last-minute Grand Tour, Eleanor spends a dangerous amount of time with a man who cannot help with either goal: her brother's best friend.

As the younger son of an earl, Percy Hauxton has to fight for everything. A Grand Tour is the perfect opportunity to pursue his ambition to work for the Foreign Office, but traveling with Eleanor isn't part of the plan.

When circumstances draw them apart and a secret from the past threatens to unravel everything, Eleanor has to decide one thing. Can she marry for love, or does she need a marriage of convenience?

## **An Engaged Grand Tour: Book 2 of the Victorian Grand Tour Series**

*She's engaged to his brother, but he can't help falling in love with her anyway.*

Mining heiress Lucy Maldon is determined to track down her fiancé and make him fall in love with her, even if it means chasing him across the Continent. But Walter, Lord Chelmsford, has no intention of being found.

Peter Chelmsford lives in his brother's shadow. When his older brother decides to go on Grand Tour and leave his bride-to-be behind, Peter accompanies him. While Walter pursues other interests, it's up to Peter to keep his childhood friend safe from his brother.

Can Lucy forgive him for stealing her heart and breaking it at the same

time?

### **A Disorderly Grand Tour, Book 3 of the Victorian Grand Tour Series**

Rachel Wickford has vowed to devote her life to nursing, like her heroine, Florence Nightingale. She'd rather avoid the heartache of love, but it's hard to evade the man who's already head over heels for her.

Colonel Curtis Loughton needs experienced nurses to help Miss Nightingale's new school, but he needs a wife even more. He's willing to wage war to win over his true love, but he's never encountered opposition like this before. It will take all his ingenuity and grit to prove his devotion.

In a battle of wits, with underhanded insubordination on one side and a determined campaign on the other, can anyone claim victory, or will their hearts be the casualties?

### **An Attempted Engagement: Book 4 of the Victorian Grand Tour Series**

*Only one thing stands between Alice Loughton and the man of her dreams: her brother.*

Frederick Kempton calls her his "little mouse." She's been shy and quiet ever since he met her sixteen years ago. But when timid Alice Loughton decides it's time to marry, there's only one man for her. The one man who doesn't frighten her. The only man she can talk to without wanting to run and hide. Her brother's hired secretary and closest friend, the one man who can arrange her brother's schedule to give them time for secret meetings together.

But her brother knows Frederick Kempton too well, and he's not about to give his consent for a courtship, not when plenty of other men are pursuing Alice, too. And so, obedient Alice, who has never broken a rule in her life, is forced to take drastic measures, hide love letters by the fireplace, and settle for stolen kisses.

And she's dragged Freddie along with her. Can he walk the fine line between loyalty to his oldest friend and a chance to woo the woman he's

secretly loved?



# About the Author



Lisa went with her family on BYU Study Abroad to Vienna when she was twelve years old. The college students voted her “Most Likely To Return Without Her Parents,” and she did.

As an undergraduate at Dartmouth, she lived in Mainz, Germany, for three months, then lived in England during part of her senior year of college.

She’s lived in seven states, four countries, and moved almost forty times. Lisa enjoys traveling, but her favorite journeys are in books.

She taught English and History for seven years before quitting to pursue screenwriting. None of her screenplays hit the theaters, but she met her future husband the day she moved to Los Angeles.

After leaving L.A., she decided to write books instead of movies. Lisa Catmull lives in Utah with her husband and two rambunctious children.





# Historical Note

In January 1858, Felice Orsini, with three other accomplices, threw bombs at the emperor of France, Napoleon III, and his wife while they were on their way to the opera. Orsini and others had made and tested the bombs in England, lived in England, and argued for the unification of Italy there.

The assassination attempt created tension between France and England. The acting Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, resigned in February 1858, because of resulting pressure.

England did, in fact, prepare for an invasion by France, which never occurred. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert met with the emperor, Napoleon III and the empress, but not until August 1858, and they met in Cherbourg, not at the Palace of Versailles.

On a lighter note, the *carte de visite* was a small photograph collected and traded during this time period. André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri won the patent and popularized the cards when he made a *carte de visite* of Napoleon III.

Egyptomania was another craze, like collecting *cartes de visite*. The excavations in Egypt and texts on Egyptian mythology and history created a passion for anything to do with the ancient culture. Tourists visited the region in the cooler fall and winter months.

Octavia's fascination with Egypt and their honeymoon cruise are based on real books from the time period. Sir John Gardner Wilkinson's *A Handbook for Travellers in Egypt* can be accessed on HathiTrust.org. *Boat Life in Egypt in Nubia* by William Cowper Prime is also a real book from 1857.

# Social Hierarchy in the Victorian Era, 1837-1901

Titles can be confusing because there are three ways to address people: (1) the way one addressed an envelope to them and the way someone announces their name formally, (2) the way one addressed a letter to them, and (3) the way one speaks to them. The graphics on the following pages illustrate the way one would address someone in speech.

I used examples to demonstrate. Victoria and Albert London are the hypothetical people. The title name are also London for our purposes, although the family name and title would not usually be the same.

## Notes on the children of the aristocracy

Daughters of a duke, marquess, or earl are called Lady and their first name (Lady Victoria)

Daughters of a viscount or baron are called Miss, but not called Lady (Miss Victoria)

Younger sons of a duke or a marquess are called Lord and their FirstName, but they don't hold a title (Lord Albert)

Younger sons of an earl, viscount, or baron without titles are called Mr. (Mr. London)

## Peerage and Titles Explained

Peers are the dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons. They are the nobility and the title holders. They sit in the House of Lords.

A duke is called the Duke of a Place, like the Duke of London. Marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons are always called Lord LastName, like Lord London. They are never called Baron Title or Baron LastName. It is the House of Lords, not the House of Marquesses, Earls, Viscounts, and Barons.

A baronet or knight is called Sir FirstName, like Sir Albert. His wife is called Lady LastName, like Lady London. The female

equivalent of a knight is called a dame, and her husband is called Mr. LastName, like Mr. London.

Peers sat in the House of Lords and often attended Parliament. It often began January thirty-first and ended August twelfth, although it ended on July 29, 1856, the year this story takes place. Eleanor and Percy got married on August 1, 1856, after the Season ended for that year.

Although some families were in town in February, most Peers brought their families back after Easter. Parties, balls, excursions, and art exhibits were in full swing during May, June, and July.

Baronets and knights are not Peers and do not sit in the House of Lords.

Men often referred to other men by their title or last name only, like London, instead of Lord London or Albert.

Men and women did not usually call each other by their first name or given name. It was a sign of increasing intimacy or appropriate for childhood friends who had grown up together, like Lucy, Rachel, Eleanor, Walter, and Peter. Women might call each other by their first names once they became friends, like Alice, Rachel, and Lucy.

The oldest daughter was Miss LastName, like Miss London. Her younger sisters were Miss FirstName LastName, like Miss Victoria London and Miss Elizabeth London.

A nobleman often held more than one title. A duke might also be a marquess and an earl. An earl might also be a viscount. The oldest son or heir would be allowed to use the lesser title.

The *ton* was the Upper Crust that socialized in London. It was comprised of royalty, aristocracy, and members of the gentry. Some wealthy business owners or bankers were included as well.

Servants had a hierarchy of precedence, too. In the lower classes, some servants were called by their last names and others were called by their first names. The housekeeper and cook were called "Mrs." whether or not they were married.

And then there were the clergy. Oh, this is as complicated as everything else! It needs another page to explain...Here are some highlights. There are three forms of address for clergy as well.

For example, clergymen were never called "reverend" as their form of address, just as a title. The Reverend Albert London or the Reverend Deacon Albert London would be the formal address on an envelope, but in conversation or to his face he would be simply be

called Deacon London or Mr. London, never Reverend London.

The archbishops and bishops sat in the House of Lords.

An archbishop was called “Your Grace” or “Archbishop.”

Bishops, diocesan bishops, or suffragan bishops were called “My Lord” or “Bishop.”

A Canon, Prebendar, or Archdeacon was called only by their title.

Other clergy in the Church of England were called “Mr.” or by their position: vicar, rector, curate, chaplain, or dean. Someone might say, “Come on in, Vicar. It’s good to see you, Mr. London,” and be talking to the same person. He was the vicar, but he was also Mr. London. He was not Vicar London.

*The illustrations on the following pages have the titles on the top and the names by which they were addressed on the bottom or to the side. Remember, this is the way one would talk to them in speech, not the way one would address an envelope. You would not use a formal title like “Earl” in conversation, like “Good day, Earl London,” but would instead say, “Good day, Lord London.”*

## Social Hierarchy in the Victorian Era 1837-1901

*Presented in descending order of precedence (rank)*

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### Royalty

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### Aristocracy

Duke His Grace	Duchess Her Grace
Marquess/Marquis Lord London	Marchioness Lady London
Earl Lord London	Countess Lady London
Viscount Lord London	Viscountess Lady London
Baron Lord London	Baroness Lady London

- The Duke and Duchess are never called Lord and Lady.
- For Lords and Ladies: the last name is taken from their title, not their family name.



## Gentry

Baronet	Dame
Sir Albert	Lady London

Knight	<i>His wife</i>
Sir Albert	Lady London

<i>Her husband</i>	Dame
Mr. London	Dame London

Untitled land owners

Military officers

Vicars, curates, and church officials

Solicitors

Land stewards and personal secretaries

Governesses, tutors, and companions

Physicians, sometimes called Dr., like Dr. London

- Members of the gentry are called Mr. or Mrs./Miss unless specified otherwise
- Some men held more than one title. A man with a military rank might also be a knight or a baronet.

### **Middle/Merchant Class**

Doctors, surgeons

Wealthy business owners, bankers

- The Upper Class usually called them by their last name only
- 

### **Lower Class/Working Class**

Housekeeper - Mrs. London

Cook - Mrs. London or Cook

Valet, butler - London

Lady's maid/abigail - Miss London or London

Coachman - Albert Coachman

Farm workers, tenants - London

- The housekeeper and butler were equals. The valet and lady's maid were equals.

Servants - Victoria or Albert

The poor - Victoria or Albert

Factory and shop workers - Victoria or Albert